THE CITY OF THE SAVED

MORE TALES OF THE CITY

Edited by Philip Purser-Hallard

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‘Once upon a time, the universe ended.

‘Now, that’s the sort of thing clever people generally see coming, and luckily someone had. Nobody knows quite who they were – or, if they do, they’re not telling any tales – but somebody had built a rest home for humanity, a retirement village as big as a galaxy with all the necessary amenities, utilities and mod cons a species comes to rely on in its dotage.

‘The restful obsolescence we’d always dreamed of was there waiting for us, and all we had to do to get there was die.

‘That wasn’t a problem, really. Building a hundred thousand light-year megastructure beyond the end of the universe itself, and filling it with unprintable numbers of human-scale buildings, transport systems, seas and parkland, washed by the soothing light of a quartz-coloured sky-dome a kiloparsec high – most people would agree that that’s a bit of a challenge. But dying? Pah. A newborn baby could do that.

‘And so it was that sooner or later, no matter how tenuously and ingeniously we held on to our original lives, everybody in the universe ended up here.

‘Well, everybody human, anyway. Whoever they were, the Founders seem to have had a sentimental attachment to the human species, as opposed to our neighbours in the universe.

‘Homo erectus and Neanderthals? Come on in, grandma, slip off your aurochs-skin moccasins and hang your spear-thrower by the fire. Posthumans, transhumans, metahumans? All welcome, we’re very broad-minded here, some of our best friends etcetera. Part-human hybrids? Well, someone needs to do the gardening and cleaning, and there probably won’t be enough good-natured Australopithecines to go round.

‘But *extraterrestrials*? Let’s be realistic. Charming people some of them, very polite and surprisingly nimble with their pincers, but you wouldn’t want to share an afterlife with them. You have to draw the line somewhere.

‘So here we awoke on Resurrection Day, baffled and bewildered by what we’d just experienced – whether it had been instantaneous or drawn-out, painful or comforting, an infuriating curtailment of a joyful endeavour or a blessed relief from lifelong misery – and found ourselves once again responsible for that strange combination of chemical changes, homeostatic responses and spiritual epiphanies which we call “life”.

‘And here, ever since then, we have stayed, resting in splendid isolation, we humans of the universe and you growing generations of our postmortal descendants – just a cosy few hundred thousand million billion trillion of us: deathless, painless and, thanks to this peculiar upgrade they’ve installed in our brains’ language centres, all understanding one another’s stories perfectly.

‘Really, what could be nicer? Unless you’re a lunatic, of course. Or a part-human hybrid. Or somebody who *really* hates being alive.

‘For most of us, though, you have to admit that this is as good as it gets.

‘Once upon a time, the universe ended. And they all lived happily ever after.’

In a bar in a street on a hill, in a pretty coastal District built around a bay on a distant outflung meander of the local saltwater gigariver, the River Garbhodaka, which flows sluggish and solar- systems wide beneath the darkening sky-dome in the Western Quarter of the City of the Saved, a bearded man’s audience applauds him enthusiastically.

Naturally the listeners in the tavern have heard this story before, in innumerable variants.

Humanity has few characteristics which can truly be called universal, but the tendency to mythologise its own existence turned out long ago to be one of them. The bearded skald’s retelling, playful and subversive though it was, was nevertheless a reworking of the City’s most enduring legend, of how it came to be. True,

some of the City-born in the audience rolled their eyes when the bard began his tale, but even they appreciate that the monthly open-mike storytelling evening at The World Turned Upside- Down needs something familiar to break the ice.

The storyteller, garbed in an Anglo-Saxon tunic and cloak with a circlet on his forehead, grins and gives a self-mocking bow before returning to sit with his husband. He nods in gratitude as Akroates, the World's barman and landlord, sends a flagon of mead through the crowd in his direction.

These sessions were Akroates' idea originally, cooked up in collaboration with Arianrhod, the regular at The World Turned Upside-Down who is acting as MC. For reasons beyond Akroates' fathoming, Motet Hill is becoming a fashionable destination for the citizens of Calafia on their frequent evenings out, and the World's weekly pub quiz run by Roger, the brain-in-a-jar who teaches Posthistory at Calafia College, was no longer cutting the mustard.

Arianrhod, an Orpheid with permanent frost-rime in her hair and shockingly tranquil eyes, calls dreamily for the next volunteer to tell their story. In deference to Orpheid custom, a holographic fire- pit has been set up in the centre of the room. The capering flames are so realistic that Akroates keeps worrying about them setting light to something.

The barman surveys the crowd: a decent turnout, thirty or forty people crowded onto the benches and stools, and even standing near the doors. The patrons are the usual Calafia mix: mostly human- standard resurrectees, with a sprinkling of posthumans and some City-born, many of exotic mixed- species descent. Akroates, a resurrected cyclops, stands out much less around here than he used to.

Unsettling rumours are sweeping the City, distant hints of change of an unspecified but unwelcome nature, and even Calafia is not immune. At such times, the publican believes this form of entertainment, simple yet universal (although ironically, in his original native culture of nomadic shepherd-hermits, communal storytelling would have been regarded as dangerously progressive and decadent) should come as a comfort to his clientele. That said, last month many of the attendees, Akroates included, were spooked by one of Roger's colleagues, a criminologist who seemed too reassuringly reliable to be fabricating the events of his macabre and surely exaggerated story.

A second volunteer stands – another of the World's regulars, a florid, grossly fat man in a tailored suit that could clothe a double bed. He is immediately joined by the floating mikedrone. Finding no other calls on his attention, Akroates leans forward on his bar, eager to hear what story this new teller has to tell.

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THE LONG-DISTANCE SOMNAMBULIST

Ian Potter

People used to say there were just seven stories, didn't they? Well, they did in my day. When you tried to pin down what the seven actually were they'd usually get a bit vaguer.

As a matter of fact there's just the one story. You just have to choose how you slice it. Trust me – I'm a historian, I know this stuff. We chop the big, sweeping narrative up small – make it into something we can deal with, something we can digest, something we can make sense of. When the world's gone topsy-turvy, you get yourself in a bar and try to fight the crazy by creating a little sliver of sense for yourself.

So, if I'm going to tell you my slice of the big, mad story, you'll need to realise I've cut a lot out and tried to keep it lean so we won't be here all night. No really, you can tell by my belly I've a tendency to expand, and I've a gut feeling that barman needs his shut eye more than most.

So let's pretend this all began a few years ago even though it didn't, and sketch in any gaps as we need to. If any of you want a comfort break or need to get more pickled eggs at any point I'll do my best to digress some.

Imagine me five years ago – a bit slimmer, a bit smilier, a bit slimier. I was sitting in my scriptorium in the Boheca District, working late, plumbed into my book, trying not to catch my reflection in the window. This wasn't at the really seedy end of Boheca where the artists hang out. I couldn't afford that. It was in the more gentrified end where the *Weekend Culture Guide* readers live. There's a bit of mystique there without so much of the hysteria.

The dome of the sky was darkening overhead and faintly witty installation art was being projected onto the neon sponsor clouds below. I lived above the clouds back then.

I'd been transcribing interviews all day, eating doughnuts from a no longer modish street seller whose prices had just gone down, and looking for where to edit. Errors were starting to creep into my work, quill blips and gastro jams, and I was thinking about my bed.

I was just about ready to turn in when I heard the ping of the elevator in the hall outside. Brisk, short footsteps clipped down the tiled hallway, and I knew somehow this was a visitor for me. The only other business on my floor was an industrial carpet-cleaner and his clientèle didn't tend to take such dainty steps or call at quite such unfashionable hours. I pulled out my data-stoma and tried to make myself look respectable.

See, when I've been writing a while I forget how to be with people. I'm not quite sure who I should be being, if you know what I mean. Sometimes that means you go days in just your a-shirt and jockeys with a wire in your navel. It's not a good look.

I hurriedly grabbed my nearest clean shirt, catching a glimpse of myself struggling with it in the neon drenched glass as I did. 'Buy Contentment,' announced the cloud ad behind my reflection. I couldn't help noticing the shirt didn't button up quite as well as it had. 'Discontent back if not completely satisfied,' the cloud continued.

There was a sharp knock at the door, and it slid open before I could yell 'Hold on!'

'Citizen Greaves?' said a woman. Her voice was raspier than I've done it there, but it was close to that.

'Citizen Greaves?' she rasped. There, that's closer.

'That's me,' I said. That's how I sounded back then – a bit reedier, less resonant.

'The history guy? Yes.'

'A history guy,' I said. 'Sure.' I slipped my stoma-cable discreetly into my desk drawer. Being caught

quilling feels kinda intimate to a guy of my era, like crapping in public or having your net searches auto-completed.

The woman stepped into my room, somehow conspiring to make that grotty box with a desk and fold-up bed seem glamorous. You'd call her a broad or a dame except she wasn't exactly either – she was far too narrow to be a broad and far too feminine for Panto. She was tall, thin, vertical – raised up on fierce heels and held in by sharp tailoring and a thin pencil skirt, like a well-groomed Giacometti. She looked like she'd stepped out of a 1940s film whose colours had somehow failed to fade with time.

Sorry, that's my birth period talking again. Back in the Last Universe the 1940s was all uncertain inks and centenarians' memories to me, ghostly and corroding. I was born at the hot end of what they used to call the twenty-first century CE. By the time I died some of the more confident rich kids were starting to call it the second Millennium and banking on seeing in a third. If you ever meet any of those guys be sure to be kind. Don't ask them why their uploads never made it here with their meat selves. They hate that.

'I need you to find me someone,' said the Broad Dame. 'I believe you do that.'

I smiled and waved out the window. The lights of the City stretched out below us under the coloured clouds.

'Everyone's out there for finding.' I said.

The Broad Dame gave a minimal nod, like she knew she was in close up and didn't want to go too big. 'But you go the extra mile,' she said.

That was true. You see, the book I was writing back then was *The Book of Everyone* – the history of all humankind, and that involves some travelling.

You might reckon a history of everyone's a bit much, but you're wrong. It's far too much. I'm not an idiot – even at my weight I'm a little man in the face of everything, I know that. But if I've learned anything in life it's that you have to fill your time in, and, let's face it, we've got a lot of time to fill now.

I lived as well as I could in the first slice of my story – that little block of twenty-first century Common Era I was born in. I was confident I'd be getting maybe seventy, eighty years, five hundred million breaths or so, and it was pretty much all going be in the one place. It was a useful frame to work with.

I only got fifty years as it went, but I filled them well. I breathed deep, pursuing my interests. You could do that if you got the breaks and were born in the right place, back then. If you were part of what we came to call the Eloicracy you just looked for the stuff that grabbed you and went for it. I was small in those days – no, really, a slight and clumsy, bookish boy, more at home in the library than in the park, so what grabbed me was books. I loved them all, especially the ones people said I shouldn't, but the kinds I loved most were histories and mysteries. I reckoned the very best bit of both them was that bit where you couldn't quite tell them apart.

To cut a short story shorter, I ended up studying an era they called the Dark Ages back then. It had it all – history and mystery. I wrote a fair-sized book that got fair reviews called *Candle-Summoned Shades*, and it did pretty well. I made myself a bit of a name and a bit of a living. I regret the title a little now, but it did the job.

Candle-Summoned Shades by Lewis Greaves, look it up. I still occasionally meet people who tell me how much they liked it. It's mainly people from around my era, but, you know, I guess you had to be there.

I was planning the second edition when I got my diagnosis. I'd had a bonus brain fitted to absorb the new data involved, the most expensive one I could afford, one of the belly jobs. They were still quite new then. The extra neurons were linked directly to the ones in the stomach wall on those early versions. The idea was they were easier to get at down there and you could mount the power unit in the pelvis without shoving too much out of the way. Anyway, that's why I thought I was having problems keeping food down at first. I was wrong.

Anyway, you know the score, most of you've been there, most of you've died. Let me tell you, though – if you haven't, you've never lived. No, don't heckle! It's a turn of phrase not an ontological statement. Honestly, you City-born are so touchy! You're not real! Again, just a turn of phrase. Really.

I tried to keep working but I had to let the second edition go. I had to let everything go.

The point is, after Resurrection Day, when I finally realised I was back and it didn't look like I was going anywhere else in a hurry, I didn't just have unfinished business, I suddenly had a bigger frame to fill. I needed something to justify all the new breaths I'd been given.

I offered the Broad Dame a drink. She declined, so I poured one for myself. It wasn't a bourbon like this one – I wish it had been, that might have impressed her. It was a small nutty sherry. You use what you've got.

'There are lots of historians out there, lady,' I said. 'Why me? Why not Herodotus? Why not Haining?'

'I didn't get as far as the Hs, Citizen Greaves.'

It was a cute answer and she knew just how cutely she'd delivered it. She flashed a tight, controlled smile and continued. 'There aren't so many consulting historians. You're nearer, cheaper and more tenacious than anyone else out there. The way I hear it you plan to get round to the job I want someday, anyhow. I'm just offering you an incentive to push it up your list.'

Word had got out about my project. That's what word does.

When it first dawned on me that literally everyone had been reborn here it'd made finishing a new edition of my book slightly pointless. It couldn't be about the evidence that had survived the Dark Ages any more. That evidence was as gone as the time it'd survived to, vanished like the planet that housed it. There was something more interesting in its place though – the people who'd left it behind. My revised history book would have to be told by the people, not their relics.

It took a while working out where most of the Dark Agers had ended up in the City. Whatever system originally assigned us our new City addresses had put most of them a long way from my deme. I eventually found a few old chieftains sharing a place in one of the colder outskirts of Penumbria District and arranged a visit.

We didn't immediately hit it off. It turned out living in ninth-century Northumberland didn't necessarily equip you to know that much about it. It also turned out a lot of people who had lived and died in those tough times and places were keener on having fun in this great hereafter than they were on looking back. I saw a heck of a lot of parties and a fair few pitched battles in the months I spent with the chieftains. Towards the end I could usually tell them apart.

Later on I managed to hook up with an eighth-century monk who I had a bit more in common with. I was at a history fair. It's a profile thing – you can sometimes make a bit of moolah coaching re- enactors or get some work advising on the legend soaps. He was getting his Bible autographed and I passed him queuing for Luke. I recognised the Pelagian cut of his tonsure, as you do, and we fell to talking.

'Bit disappointed Jesus hasn't turned up,' I said. This was an understatement. He'd not been advertised but there'd been a lot of talk of a mystery guest that had got some of the event's more excitable attendees whispering about how exactly one might make an entrance like a 'thief in the night'.

'Be fair, he'd be mobbed,' said the monk. Very dry, a bit rumbly. He had a lisp but I won't do it.

'There's a Simon of Cyrene panel later though,' he added. 'That could be interesting.' That's why I didn't do the lisp. He talked about Simon of Cyrene a lot.

His name was Alcuin and he was as big a book fan as me. He'd illuminated manuscripts 'til his hands and eyes failed in the 700s, then fell down some stairs one winter when his hands and eyes were in really poor shape and died instantly. He set me straight on quite a lot. It won't mean much to you but some of it was massive – the twenty-first century had got the Gundestrup Cauldron seriously wrong for starters. To be fair we hadn't had the wooden bits that would have stored traces of fondue, but that and all the gags we'd missed in Bede were real eye-openers.

The other thing Alcuin did was ask me how I was planning to fill eternity.

This was the early days, remember. Back then, a lot of us were still trying to duck the issue. Living forever's pretty big, after all – it's infinitely bigger than we can think about, and we tend to dodge facing it because it's scary and we know there'll be time for that later. I decided I needed a plan.

'Who wants eternity if you're just going to pootle through it as who you were for a few decades in the past?' I thought. I spent my first life unhappy and awkward and scared. Insignificant. Who wants to be that forever, in an eternity that doesn't offer any of the answers you'd hoped for? What's the point of muddling through an unending afterlife where Jesus never shows up at conventions with explanations and anecdotes?

Alcuin made me realise I needed something bigger than me in my hereafter. 'I'm going to need a bigger book,' I told him.

'Do you know 1930s Chicago, Citizen Greaves?' croaked the Broad Dame. I guessed she'd smoked a lot of cheap cigarettes in her time.

'Only to point at,' I said. I didn't even know what that meant, but brittle witticisms seemed to be the currency here and I was eager to trade.

'I grew up there. I knew it well,' she said.

I could have argued that. Sure, you get detail close up, but you need distance to see some of the patterns, see what you can safely slice out. I didn't quibble – I just sipped my sherry and said 'Uh huh.' I probably shouldn't have but it felt right at the time.

The Broad Dame took a deep breath; it fought against her jacket, shiny bone buttons straining, catching the light. Her clothes were cut for shallower stuff.

'There was a murder there in 1936,' she said, 'a school friend of mine, Jenny Wray. The crime was never solved.'

'You want me to find out what happened?'

'I want you to find Jenny, Citizen Greaves.'

'Surely, you don't need me for that, Citizen…?' I left a gap for her to drop her name into, or correct me over her title. She didn't. 'Try the Omniweb,' I said. 'Keep searching past H. There'll be a record of her somewhere.'

The Broad Dame sighed. It was a hiss like a downtown espresso machine. 'I don't think she wants to be found, Citizen Greaves. I tried tracking her down about ten years back, but I guess she's gone into hiding. I've not been able to find any trace of her since.'

I nodded. 'A lot of murder victims seek out new lives in the City, Citizen. They don't like the celebrity.'

To be fair some do. A couple of the Ripper victims are constants at crime conventions, but generally the murdered welcome fame for the way their lives ended about as much as people who've died with odd things up their bottoms.

'Her death changed my whole life,' said the Broad Dame. 'Hung over me. Made me feel wary, unsafe, like nothing made sense. It kinda ruined a few things. I thought maybe being born again, knowing Jenny had been too, I'd be over it, but I can't stop remembering. I guess I just want to know she's over it, see that she's okay.'

I understood that, of course – the need to move on. 'Why do you think I'll find her if she wants to be hidden?' I asked.

'Because you want to find everyone.'

That was true. The plan was my book project would have everyone in it who ever lived. Even you'd have been there at some point. You might think refusing to talk to me would have put an end to it and made me go away, but I'd got good at not going away. I reckoned if I'd got forever I could wait. Who'd want to spend an eternity denying me an interview?

I'd been working on the book for about a hundred and fifty years by the time I met the Broad Dame. I was working in date order as best I could and was making my way through Early Man. The first few hominids had been the most difficult. They hadn't really got much idea about books or history or conversation. They'd lived before any of that stuff had got properly started.

I'd decided to start with Aa, the first woman. I'd taken the tube out to Mappamundi Park and walked the last bit of the journey from the nearest station to her – three days across the African plains, hell of a journey.

For eight years she wouldn't speak to me, but I'd known she was the nut I had to crack to get her children on my side. Every morning I'd greet her cheerily, and then follow her around all day. It was slow but it worked well enough. After all, nothing she threw at me could kill me and she wasn't really up on the harassment laws.

'Greetings, Great Mother of Humanity!' I'd say.

'Morning, oh worshipped First Ancestor! Nice punch!'

'Can I ask you a few questions, Source of All?' That kind of thing. Nothing. Then one evening, just as the fire's flames were dying and the staff were closing up the restaurant she put down her tequila and turned to me.

‘Will you please just piss off?’ she said.

Just like that, but with mushier vowels. I haven’t got the mouth shape.

It was a breakthrough. The very first human being to have an essence that could be resurrected was telling me to go away. A decade later we were firm friends.

There’s one thing she said that still haunts me: ‘I miss them, Lewis.’

That wasn’t in a formal interview. That was one evening over cards. She put down one of her cigars, blew out a lungful of smoke and said ‘I miss them.’ It surprised me.

All her descendants were with her in the afterlife, everyone who came after her. She was worshipped by thousands but she still hankered for the smell of her not-quite-human parents and the touch of her not-quite-human lost lovers. I held her hand, that first not-quite-finished hand, and we watched her smoky breath drift away and dilute.

Anyway, none of that's the point. I was working on Homo habilis when the Broad Dame caught up with me and I was ready for a change by then. I was twelve million words down and very little had happened, except I'd had to pay for a gut expansion to keep track of the minutiae of it all.

Strict chronology had fallen by the wayside within a generation. The babies who'd died in minutes and their hardy brothers who lived for thirty years had intertwined lives but their interviews couldn't be. There were just too many people too quickly, and identifying just which of the claimants for the honour of first fire-maker or wheelwright took primacy was painstaking and dull. I'd pretty much filled my whole belly with little more than the tribal disputes of Korgzulkur the Polysyllabic and Ha the Carcase-Sniffer. The appeal of nipping ahead and tackling some of a later chapter early was strong. It'd mean I could get away from the Hominid Advocacy Alliance for a while too. You've probably not had much trouble with them unless you've been caught shouting at street cleaners but once they take against you they're a pain.

'Don't you think you're misrepresenting pre-sapiens experience by co-opting it into a sapienscentric progress-based narrative, Professor?' they'd squeak. All high-pitched like that, not a dash of testerosterone between then.

They'd somehow got wind of my project and started popping up behind rocks and shouting at me every time I tried to interview a cave painter or get the address of some shaman. If you ever asked them why they'd just bluster about abusing evolutionary privilege and start bleating about non- hierarchical modes of discourse.

'A lot of my best friends are protohuman, Professor,' they'd protest.

'Really?' I'd say.

'Well, they would be if friendship as we understand it was a valid protohuman concept.'

'Oh.'

'And I know if they could think like I can they wouldn't want…' I won't go on. Doing the voice makes my eyes water. They seem nice enough chaps, twenty-third-century most of them, and I'm sure I'll understand them better when it's their turn to be interviewed, but having to replay all this bellyaching after every interview… Well, it was enough to make me accept the Jenny Wray job gladly.

The Broad Dame filled me in on the important details. Jenny had been twelve when she died. Her murder had been horrific – the kind of thing the papers liked to salaciously half-reveal. I won't spell out the details. Let's just say it made a kind of sense of the buttoned-up woman in front of me. It seemed to me this awful crime had shaped her whole attitude to life.

I guessed, if I was to track down Jenny, finding her parents was a sensible first step. I figured they'd have gone searching for her ahead of me and the chances were she'd have gone looking for them too. You're twelve, you're taken to pieces – sorry, you didn't need to hear that – and you're reborn. I figured after all that you'd want your parents and they'd want you too.

They were pretty easy to track down as it happened, so easy I was surprised the Broad Dame didn't seem to have done it. They lived in a District called Svilsville. It was a strict recreationists' place, devoted to 1930s America. It's one of those towns where you get stern letters if you go out in non-period shoelaces. It's a lot like Paynesdown but with less silly weather. I had to pass a lot of exams to get in there and Customs made me get a whole new swanky wardrobe. You didn't get to my weight without serious money behind you in 1930s America.

It seems most of the people of Svilsville lived in the 1930s in the Last Universe and weren't been keen to move on afterwards. I guess we all tend to cling to what we know. I gather there's a handful of adventurous souls there from earlier eras too, living at the limits of their cultural and technological imaginations. The rest are the kind of tourists who like the idea of going somewhere ghastly so they can show off about later. It's a depressingly big place.

The Wrays still lived together, in an apartment a lot like the one they'd known in life, in an area enough like Chicago to make Chicago double-take. He was a deal frailer than his wife now, positively ancient. She'd been reborn somewhere around her late twenties, he'd come back a bed- ridden old man. It was hard not to take that as a sign of the ways grief had taken them. Ma Wray was frozen as she'd been just before they'd lost their daughter, as if her life had ended then too. Pa Wray seemed to have so given up on existence that he'd been reborn as near dead as he could manage.

When I came calling about their daughter, they were not pleased to meet me.

'Mister, that's ancient history you're prying at.' Pa Wray was kinda slow and tremulous, like a weary gramophone.

I smiled. 'But that's my job, sir. I'm a historian.'

'No. It's our lives.' I'm doing him a bit quicker than he did to save time.

Ma snapped at me. 'Jenny doesn't live with us, mister! She doesn't want reminding about the past and she wants nothing to do with you!' She was more Carole Lombard in *My Man Godfrey* than that, but I know my limits.

She somehow shoved me to the door and slammed it in my face, startling me with her strength. All I could do was waddle back down the stairs of their tenement to the street.

What the Wrays hadn't reckoned with was my stubbornness. I'd got good at waiting. I'd had the mother of Humanity eating out of my hand, quite literally, once or twice, through patience. I was convinced they knew where their daughter was and that eventually they'd tell me.

So, I walked the streets, I spoke to neighbours, I lost money gambling and bought generously in gin joints. I asked and asked again if anyone had seen Jenny.

Eventually, about a year or so in, someone snapped like I knew they would. It was a little guy, red-faced, liked to listen to the wireless on his porch of an evening and complain about the solutions to the *True Detective Mysteries*.

'Say, Greaves,' he said – through the nose like that. 'Why you still bothering good folk with all your questions?'

'I'm trying to find a girl,' I said. 'You know that. The Wrays' daughter.'

'You're making the place untidy is all.'

I couldn't agree. If anything my attire was raising the tone of Svilsville. I said so and the little man leaned forward from his deck chair.

'Exactly. You don't fit!' he whined. 'All you do is remind people this place isn't real. Don't you see? Folk here want to live like they're not dead. Makes things simpler.'

'You know how to make me go away.'

The man glanced around, licking his lips like they were dry. 'So, you'd go if you knew where the girl was?' he asked.

'Sure.'

'Thing is, Greaves, I wouldn't want to be the one who told you,' he said. 'Not willingly. I'd hate to fall out with my neighbours if word got around it was me.'

'I'm not sure I know how to persuade you,' I said. I was reaching for my money belt.

The little man puffed out his cheeks. 'Haven't you got a machine that can force the truth from me?' he whispered. 'Something invented in the 1970s, say? Something no one here would understand?' I shook my head.

'I didn't see that,' said the man flatly and I finally caught his meaning.

We pretended my cigarette lighter was a cunningly-disguised future truth-enforcer and 'struggling against his will', the little man 'blurted out' the truth about Jenny, then cried for help. It was a ridiculous subterfuge,

but I guess he really wanted me gone so he could get back to not liking his whodunnits.

People came running, but they were only in time to console my informant after the event as I sprinted for the Svilsville border. I say 'sprinted'. It was more a very fast walk.

As far as anyone in Svilsville was concerned I'd tricked the truth out of the poor little guy with my anachronistic box of tricks. Even the tourists who'd know no such machine existed would pretend to believe it so everyone could keep living their simpler 1930s lives, without me reminding of them of the bigger world beyond.

It turned out Jenny was one of those kids who'd stayed the same age after death. She was still a tiny twelve-year-old kid. The upside for her was that had meant her brain was still fast. She was sharp and adaptable. According to the little guy in the deckchair she'd got herself a good job in town- planning in one of the City's tidier Districts, building up some sleepy little fishing place into a thriving hub.

It seemed she'd visited her parents fairly regularly for a hundred years or so but there'd been some kind of falling out about five years ago. Ma Wray had been keeping Jenny's old room like a shrine and there'd been a row about letting her grow up. It sounded like the usual family stuff, just a little magnified I guess.

It didn't take much work to track down Jenny after that. She'd moved out of her old deme and changed her name a few times, but I had her place of work, and I knew she was still a kid. There weren't a lot of twelve-year-olds in her line.

I started lunching in places near her work, the planning offices on Motet Hill here in Calafia, hoping to catch sight of her. I'd decided not to approach her directly. I didn't want her to run again. I was sitting just over there where Tom and Matt are, nine years back, watching the door, when it swung open.

It was the Broad Dame.

Now, if this was a tidy story I guess this'd be when I'd have realised she'd been Jenny all along – that there was a little girl hidden inside those oh-so-tight clothes – that riding around on high heels, disguising her face with makeup and her voice with cigarettes was a little girl searching for a part of herself she'd lost.

Unfortunately this is a messy story, so none of that's true.

The Broad Dame strutted over and lowered herself into a seat by my side, back ramrod-straight.

'You followed me,' I said.

'Sure I did,' she croaked. 'I guessed you must be close to Jenny. No one comes to a dump like Calafia for no reason.' No offence, people. That was her, not me.

It wasn't that day Jenny came in. It'd have been tidy, sure, but it wasn't. Plots unroll slower when you've eternity to play with.

It was a week or so later. I was on my second trip round the lunch options as I recall. The Broad Dame was mainly drinking.

Jenny was tiny, self-assured, alone. I'd have known it was her even if the Broad Dame hadn't gasped as she strode in, long blonde hair bobbing. She headed straight to the bar and clambered up one of those tall stools there. She was ordering the lasagne, I think. I won't do Jenny's voice, I'll only get heckled.

The Broad Dame put down her glass and rose unsteadily from our table.

'Careful now,' I said, 'Try not to alarm her.' I don't think I was being listened to.

The Broad Dame teetered over to Jenny's stool and tapped her on the shoulder.

'Jenny?' She turned.

'Geraldine,' said Jenny flatly. It was the ugliest sound I'd ever heard. Part of it was the coldness with which it was said, most of it was the name itself. I could see why the Broad Dame had avoided revealing it.

'I sought you out!' said the Broad Dame. I can't call her Geraldine, sorry.

'Obviously,' said Jenny. 'I wish you hadn't. Fries and salad with that please, barman.'

'I wanted to know you were all right,' the Broad Dame pressed on.

'I'm fine.'

'But you ran away.'

'I got wind I was being hunted,' said Jenny matter-of-factly. 'I don't want the way I died to define who I am, Geraldine. It's private. I lived twelve years, dying was a tiny part of that. It's nothing to do with who I was then or who I want to be now.'

The Broad Dame didn't seem to understand. 'But it was so awful…'

Jenny looked into the Broad Dame's eyes. 'It's you who's let it define your life,' she said. 'It didn't have to. You have more future than past in the City. You can let your history go.' She turned to Akroates. 'I'm sorry, I need to go. Cancel my order.' She hopped down from her stool and started to the door.

The Broad Dame grabbed Jenny's arm to stop her.

'No,' said Jenny, shaking herself free. 'You don't get to hurt me any more, Geraldine. I stopped being yours to control a long time ago.'

Something clicked into place in my head.

'I'm sorry!' said the Broad Dame, 'I'm sorry I killed you, Jenny!'

'I'm just sorry it couldn't carry on making you happy,' said Jenny and stepped out into the street. I felt dumb. I'd been so keen on gathering information I'd not stopped to think about the meaning behind my search, never wondered what exactly the Broad Dame needed from Jenny, never imagined it might have been forgiveness.

I felt like I'd been drifting, sleepwalking. I'd put in the legwork without ever being awake to what I was doing. The worst was I couldn't help wondering if my motivation was any healthier than Geraldine's search for redemption. There, I said it, that ugly word – 'Geraldine', not 'redemption'.

I'd been looking for distraction, a mystery to solve to keep me busy, a missing person to find, because there was someone else I wanted to lose. Me.

I'd always felt so small, you see – tiny and pointless. I spent my first life trying to get bigger – find a field I could be the best in. I'd had myself augmented, become a success at something with a belly full of facts. None of it had been enough. That insignificant person was still there, just larded over with trivia.

Faced with the City and forever, I'd wanted to keep getting bigger. I wanted to encompass everything, know everything. I think, when I rumbled there was no God here and Jesus wouldn't be making appearances, I saw a gap. I wanted to be Him. I never told anyone, not even Alcuin, but I think, in my gut, that was my plan for eternity. I wanted to keep growing until Lewis Greaves was so small he vanished and I could be everyone else.

That's the scariest thing about eternity, you see; the thing we all avoid facing most – having to be ourselves forever. I started *The Book of Everyone* so I could be more than that. I thought, 'We've got the time and I can afford the brain extensions, why not?' I reckoned I could know the whole story, not just my slice of it. I think I was looking for a way to die really, to go one step further than Pa Wray. I wanted to take on so much that everything I didn't like in me was diluted away to nothing.

Geraldine saved me from that. It turned out she'd had a secret I hadn't wanted to know, and I'd no desire to explore further. I realised if I was to become everyone, I'd have to embrace everyone else's failings on top of my own. I guess everyone's smaller inside than you think and there are parts of all us we're ashamed of. I'm not ready to take that on, not for everyone. I'm not sure anyone is. Not yet, anyway.

I'm replacing the old me with something smaller now. I'm walking a lot, trying to shift some weight. The book's on hold and I've given up my place in Boheca. I've been spending quite a bit of time in Svilsville, getting used to less again. It's good for that. Limited time, limited space, and some great mystery shows on the radio, though it's best to skip the endings I find.

That's one of the thing I've learned – the questions are better than the answers, or they are for me anyway. I liked the Dark Ages so much more before I could see into them properly, and the one thing I still think about more than anything are those nearly-people before Aa the City won't let us meet.

Turns out I like the mystery bit more than the history bit.

I guess that's the big story sliced down as best I can. Not everything's there because it can't be. I'm kinda relieved to be honest. Sorry about doing all the impressions of people. I really am trying to give them up, aren't I, Jenny?

Anyway, I'm going to get veg scratchings and a pint, now. What do you want?

Akroates smiles and applauds along with the others as Lewis self-consciously swats the mikedrone away. The other patrons clear the huge man a respectful gangway as he cruises across to the bar.

Greaves has been a good customer to Akroates since his arrival in Calafia, and the barman has a soft spot for Jenny, whom he has known far longer. As the fat man returns with his order, precariously perching his vastness on a bench next to Jenny's tiny frame, Akroates wonders again about their relationship. Some of the regulars assume that they are lovers, others that they are mentor and student (although there are two schools of thought as to which way that might work). Akroates' guess is that they are simply friends, but he would be the first to acknowledge that this is no-one's business but their own.

They would not be the most mismatched couple in the tavern this evening, in any event. The blubbery woman in the sailcloth suit looks as if she could give them a nautical tale, as do one or two of her tiny parasitic husbands.

Partly for his own amusement, and partly in case Arianrhod needs him to give her a nod later on, Akroates has been picking out other likely storytellers from the assembled punters, as well as possible troublemakers. A barman quickly learns that all his customers have stories to tell, but having the nerve to divulge them to a roomful of strangers is another matter. Most of the stories at these sessions seem to be autobiographical, like Lewis's, and these are perhaps the stories the Citizens feel the most need to confide to such an audience.

An intense-looking old man with blurred tattoos and some facial scarring – obviously a first- lifetime legacy too traumatic for his resurrected body to forget – is another obvious candidate. There is a woman with bulky camera-implants in her cicatrised face, a leafy chlorohuman sneezing out clouds of pollen, a Denisova hominin of indeterminable sex wearing a skeleton-print onesie, prime possibilities all….

…Oh, and a stag party of young human-normal men, plus a couple of more exotic hangers-on, whose privileged quacking and yapping may at some point become a problem for Arianrhod. Seven feet tall and with a firm grasp of diplomacy, Akroates has never seen the need to employ a bouncer, but evicting customers is never a prospect he particularly relishes.

To his surprise, though, after the obligatory foot-shuffling and eye-contact-avoidance, it is one of this party – a lean young man in a natty houndstooth suit, with a slightly puzzled look in his blue eyes

– who is inveigled into telling the evening's third story. His protestations that he 'was just about to get a round in' are met with scant sympathy from his peers, who are braying, 'Tell 'em the one about the bodysnatchers, Hal!'

Arianrhod nods graciously, and the mikedrone swoops across to hover next to the young partygoer.

* * *

DOUBLE TROUBLE AT THE PARASITES ON THE PROLETARIAT CLUB

Simon Bucher-Jones

My turn to tell a tale then? That's fine, if you can get the drinks in. I think I've got them pegged, but I can barely afford the ink to jot them down for you.

A rum and splash, a finnegan's slake for the corpusclevore, two whampagne fizzles, a G.&T. and a Castrol GTX. And for me?

Well that's kind, a glass of Worpelston's finest ale. It's good of you to stand the round. I would get these if a recent investment on the racecourse hadn't let me down in the handicap. I mean, I should have known Shergar wouldn't turn up to a face-off against Red Rum.

What can I tell you about myself, and the premier life of an early-twentieth-century man-about-town, in the City at the End of All Things: Eschatolopolis, if that's the word I want?

My name's Henry Montgomery Benson, Harry or Hal to the chums, and in most things my life is pretty ordinary, although I strive to give it a bit of dash at half-hols and weekends… but there was a recent turn of events that was a bit outré, a case of mistaken identities.

I never know in recounting a set of events whether to just dive straight in with the bloodstained dagger in situ in the Archbish, as it were – if you'll excuse a pre-postmortal metaphor – or with a careful historical discourse concerning the Conclave of All Popes and the blackballing of Alexander VI, explaining why the schismatic Church went in for personalised hand weapons as part of their regalia, so stop me if I'm taking too much for granted, and tip me a wink the other way if my instructions on how to excavate the interior of an avian ovoid become too complex.

When the day drifts to its close, and the scented night-flowering pomander trees release their pollen to the moths, there's no denying that the corner of Mayfair and Wimpole St, Younger London, SW1A 1AA, Mappamundi Great Park, is a very satisfying address for a chap to have.

Which makes my living in Wurst Battersky all the harder of course. 1b Mayfair and Wimpole is my nom-de-theatre address, for all my socialising. I have a P.O. box there and a redirector for my ethermail. Old Turn-for-the-Wurst is where I live and work and have my being, when the whangee and the old soft shirt are turned in, and the muffler and the flat cap are on.

Battersky Mansions, Glimsdale Road, Battersky, in the shadow of the local transformer, where ambient – if that's the phrase – energies from the City grid are folded into the specific harmonic

'thrummm' of the locally-available-technology property, is much, much, more… is there a word that means 'cheaper' without sounding cheap? Much more… egalitarian? Whereas most of Younger London is home to cockney-sparrahs, and – what's the latter-day term – yuppies, and hooraying henries, of a pure 1920s to 1970s persuasion, Battersky with its Cloudscrapers and Mimseyplexes is open to all pre-homosap and post-human alike, with only the emptiness of the old wallets as the common denomination.

Well that's my casa for you, the gutters in the sky from which we watch the stars on the ground, whereas my hobby is thoroughly upper-market and Nancy Mitfordified. Of a weekend all us wannabe gadabouts and loafers, the younger sons of the Newbility, and the pseudo-lower-middle classes like myself get to peregrinate together in the parks and clubs of Younger London, chaffing a housemaid here, and plying a catgirl with Liminado there. Still only a weekend affordability for me, alas.

I could of course work harder, and earn more, and gradually over eternity better myself to the degree that I really ended up where I fancied, but the problem with that is, obviously enough, that everyone else is doing it too – and while it shouldn't matter, it has to be said that those re-embodied with fabulously famous pasts, oodles of Big Name Contacts, and firm buttocks that repay the swish of a riding crop, have tended to rise

faster than, say, a draper's clerk, who died undistinguished at twenty-four, unmourned and capless, in an accident with a punt and a weir in a Thames backwater. I drowned with Mister Plum Wodehouse's first Jeeves story in the April '23 edition of the Strand Magazine rolled up in my back pocket. The first thing I did in the afterlife was fish it out (as miraculously restored as my floated-away cap) so I could finish it. And that, I thought there and then, was the afterlife for me.

I've never understood, incidentally, why it wasn't marble palaces all round come the Glorious Resurrection, rather than – as in my case in the immediacy of Resurrection Day – a room in a copy of The Railway Inn, East Cheam, but no doubt this is a T.M.W.N.M.T.K., and what an M. is not M.T.K. won't hurt him, as they say. And I'm glad Wodehouse was such a good writer that his work resides in eternity. No-one seems able to tell me the ending of the 'Murlac The Mesmerist' story I left on my bedside table before my watery assignation, and when I try to find its author, John Harrison Watson, in the City I seem only to find life-a-likes of the Great Detective's amanuensis, which is ironic given my career, but I digress.

Which is not to say I haven't come on, in the City. I own my own business after all, even if it is one I had to invent myself, and I make enough to pose as a gent at weekends, which is fun enough for now. Battersky is a step up from Cheam, and things are mostly on the up.

As to the daily grind, I'm a doublefinder, and I rent out dopples. Ah – I see a blank look on a couple of the posthumans, at least in the pause of the broadcast adverts across their faces' emotion- rental spectra. Shop talk can be a bit idiosyncratic.

Imagine the vast stream of human history, the constant churning of noses and eyebrows, the limited number of possible combinations of features and frames. Then, think of the limited range available to the unmodified D.N.A. helix, and even its altered post-human pseud.N.A. and pseud.E.D.A. (and don't ask what the initials stand for because not being a bodymonger I've no idea, I just pick this up as I go), but the upshot is simply this: someone looks exactly like you. Exactly Like You. And more than someone. Probably dozens of people, dozens of dozens. Everyone human who ever lived is in the City, so far as we know, and that's before you count the Other Everyones from every time a time traveller flexed the past. They live here too. Then there's the clones, and the Remakes. But even if you weren't famous enough back in history to have had people pretend to be you down the ages, or so famous now as to have remakers creating people in your image, somewhere there's just by chance a person with precisely your genes, intro and extro, you by nature and nurture, and I'm the go-between.

I find doppelgangers for people who need precision stand-ins.

What's that, the Gin and Slice is mumbling? I refute such a sordid suggestion. I am emphatically not a self-dating service, nor a supplier of willing third parties for threesomes or foursomes, but obviously if my clients get on well with themselves it may sometimes happen that a liaison or a marriage or a fling results. It's not quite as exciting as that, and of course in the City there's no need of high-class murder alibis. It's mostly people who just want a chance to avoid the office party or the annual mind-numbing stockholders' meeting. All this though is by way of being background, all you should take from it is that I'm very skilled at finding a good dopple, and hence equally skilled at spotting which ones aren't quite right. Instinct, possibly. Often it's the smallest thing. I could tell you a story about a businessman whose two simultaneous business meetings failed utterly because of a difference in earlobe size, but that's by the by. One of him was just no use at all, alas.

Suffice it to say that when I set off that Saturday for the Parasites On The Proletariat Club, where the weekend flexes its muscles and shrugs off the heavy tweeds of respectability, and the nightingale singing in Berkeley Square gets its throat medicine, I wasn't expecting to find that someone was pulling a dopple on the Club Secretary Ronald Mortimer. The sudden impact of a bread roll possibly, the committee revealing what famous guest had been roped in to hand out the prizes for the country members' annual gala probably, a

dispute with the Sweeneytown police about parking offenses definitely, but an outbreak of impersonation, no.

I think the first thing I noticed was something less than crisp in the delivery of his patent sneer.

He'd always made it perfectly evident that he regarded a lad from Cheam, and a presently post-mortal resident on floor 79 of Battersky Mansions, as being a touch below the Rt Hons and younger sons he prefers to fawn on. We had a loathe-hate relationship – or would, but for his normal precise professionalism and my ready cash – but that Saturday his sneer was just a smear of its normal self, and his leather shoes were mismatched with a pair of tan socks that Jeeves would have surely burnt by the end of a Wodehouse story or given to the deserving poor. Then he failed to bow to the Fourteenth Earl of Exton, and actually seated him to the left of the Bishop of Bath and Wells, who was toying disconsolately with a jelly-baby from the buffet and clearly missing the Middle Ages. Also there was a distinct smell of peppermint about him, whereas I knew he hated gum and sucky sweets of all kinds, and had tried to have the committee ban after-eights at dinner. Well I mean, these things add up. It just showed, didn't it? He simply wasn't himself.

I began to feel a bit creeped. The fact is, though I feel a tad silly to mention it, I'd taken a half-day earlier in the week (a benefit of self employment) and seen a classic of the silver screen with Jane Hurley from the Jolly Fisherman theme pub. It was *Invasion of The Body Snatchers* – made after my time and a film I'd heard of but never seen. I love films, they've done great things with the silver S. between my time and eternity.

I don't know if you've all seen it, but the nub of the plot is that, there's an Invasion, and the invaders are stealing our bodies. Dashed clever title really, I wonder how they think of those things. People go to sleep and these pods pop up, and when the chaps and chapesses have had a bit of shut- eye, a vegetable marrow affair that looks just like them takes over their life, but in a strangely dispassionate way, sneering badly as it might be, and choosing ill-toned socks as it were. Generally, in short, losing that lively interest in the great cut-and-thrust of human intercourse that distinguishes the human from the cucumber. I didn't recall it being specified that they smelled of mint but there was no reason they shouldn't.

Jane thought it frightfully funny, and spent a happy half-hour afterwards pointing at people and pretending to do a muted howl and making a face that I can only describe as pod-peoplely. Sometimes I'm not sure what I see in her, but that's a problem for another day, and a good time was had nonetheless – but retrospectively the whole thing began to niggle at me, when Ronald started giving a second-rate impersonation of himself.

Of course, H.G. Wells to the contrary, there never was an invasion of Earth while I was alive so far as I know, and one salient characteristic of the City of the Saved is that just as every human (broadly speaking) who ever lived seems to be alive in it, no one who isn't in some way human (broadly speaking) got to be reborn here, so you'll probably smile at my naivety. Even those of you with two noses, and retractable ears. But was a pod-person human? What, when you get right down to it, does it mean to be human? I mean, what? The City seems to know, but we have to take it on faith, almost. If you're in you're in, and if you're out you're out.

What if a wodge of the frightful pea-folk had been mid-copy when some film hero or passing champion of the oppressed had uprooted their schemes? Would they have counted as human and been Resurrected here to start their ghastly predations anew? I mean, it's not impossible is it? After all, so little seems to be these days.

Again, I know what you're thinking. Violent action against our fellows is absolutely impossible in this magical utopia at the end of Time, so how could a malicious cauliflower get the drop on a strong young man with unfortunate teeth, like Ronald? Well I wasn't sure if absorbing people while in nature's sweet repose counted as an attack. Certainly in the film, the placid post-podded personas claimed it was all hunky-dory in the communist-metaphor compost-heap. Maybe the graceful state of the City's peaceful regime wouldn't recognise being softly throttled by sweet-peas as a lethal act? Then, too, some bright young sparks have found ways, as we'll see as my tale progresses. Who here hasn't lost a nifty topper to a snatcher, or been

subjected to a ‘messer’ gun, splurting its creamy froth over a dress shirt front, long enough to let a child-gangster gang scamper off with one’s wallet? No? Ah well, just me then.

With these worrisome thoughts flapping their belfry-haunting pinions in the Benson noddle, I crept back to the Parasites On The Proletariat Club late on the Saturday evening, intending to secrete myself in its environs and have a good snoop around. Luckily the general tone of the place is easy-going, and with the eagle-eyed Ronald being suspiciously absent from the foyer, I was able to sidle in past the Jeffers twins, who were leading the bar in a round of showtunes and trying to persuade the mellowed Lords and Ladies of the Lounge to divvy up investments in *Twang!* or *Hoot!* or whatever exclamation- marked musical they had in mind this month. It was the work of a moment for Harry to hide himself in a handy cupboard with the intent of waiting for the revelry to die down. Now, I don’t pretend to shake the disapproving finger with any great vigour at the follies of my fellows, but when I say that my luminous watch saw the climes of midnight, one, two, and three, before Patticake Jeffers stopped trying to persuade his brother that ‘Sara’s thin dahlia’ was a viable rhyme for ‘paraphernalia’, and went out to hail the first bright cab of the morning, I hyperbolise not one whit.

Pushing the creaking cupboard door open, I made my cautious exit from the close confines and began with catlike stealth to make my way through the darkened club. However, the trouble with C.- like S. is, it rather relies on the absence of tea-trolleys having been abandoned in the middle of a corridor at the top of some spiral stairs. It also relies on one remembering to have wound one’s clockwork torch. I don’t know if you’ve ever pushed a fully-laden tea-trolley down a set of spiral stairs in the dark by mistake but there’s a certain amount of noise involved. Indeed it’s hard to imagine a noise that wasn’t involved. If the old club had sent out an invite to every bally sound, row, uproar, and hullabaloo possible across the range of the senses, hardly any had responded with anything but a firm, ‘Right ho! We’ll be there.’

Still, there was no denying its tonic effect on the corpus mentis. Despite my firm resolve, and aforesaid C.-like S., I had been prone to stifle a yawn as I began my search, but the simple fall of one tiny tea-trolley had galvanised me considerably. To say I was highly strung would have been as great an understatement as to call the City of the Saved ‘cosy’, as the fellow said. So I was practically skittish when I came round a corner, and found myself squelching through an oily slick of orange slime, which proceeded from under a door next to Ronald Mortimer ’s office whose white plaque identified it as, and which I knew to be, a storeroom.

It didn't smell unpleasant. In fact it definitely smelt almost appetising. Which was paradoxically the most unpleasant thing about it. For some reason the colour made me all atremble with Halloween fears. Although the film had been black-and-white, I'd assumed that the pods had been green, and now this candy colour was, even in the light of a clockwork torch, a rich mulligatawny soup and Lobster bisque oozing across the floor. No one in a P.G. Wodehouse story so far as I could recall was ever sick, but I came momentarily into possession of a mouthful of stale gorgonzola at that instant, and but for the good manners of a gentleman, I'm dashed if I shouldn't have burped.

I put my ear to the door, and from within heard a mewling inhuman sound. I cannot deny it gentle listeners, I ran… into Ronald's office, breaking the lock. Let no one say that a Benson doesn't try to do his best. If the thing that was impersonating Ronald was following the pattern of the film, it would be working to take over his family, planting copies beside them as they slumbered. Because we weren't, as I've said, hotsy-totsy, I didn't know much about chez Mortimer, but I did know he had a sister called Mabel, a corned-hair young lady whose photograph on Ronald's desk had made many a club member wrinkle a brow at the notion of someone like him having the temerity to have a sister, let alone one who showed every sign of being a pip. I opened his desk drawers and found a copy of *Angler's Weekly* and an address book. There it was, Mabel Mortimer, 27 Nonesuch Park, Younger London. The chivalrous code of the Bensons demanded that I make an attempt to save her.

I couldn't afford to wait. Even now the poor girl might be sleeping next to an orange Aspidistra of doom. Luckily automatic milk-carts run through the streets of Younger London, and like many a sometimes impecunious reveller, I have saved the shoe leather by 'riding the milk-train' home. It took me an hour to make my way, milk-cart route by intersecting milk-cart route, to the Epsom suburbs, but with never a cab in sight it was the fastest means at my disposal. You may inhabit parts of the City with gleaming monorails, but Younger London is positively bucolic. It's paradoxical that the City- wide transport systems would have moved me to another District entirely faster than the trip I needed to take, but then I recall reading somewhere that the average speed across London even in 1923 was still that of an ox-cart.

27 Nonesuch Park was a side-road at the Epsom shops end of the herbage, and while pleasantly stucco enough, was not so evidently superior to Wurst Battersky as to justify Ronald's hauteur. I felt a pang at thinking badly of the poor fish, who was now at best a mere potato of his former self, but we all of us are human, as I think I've remarked.

Taking a stone from the garden, I hoiked it at an upper window, thinking it the fastest way to break the sleep of sister, parent or aged aunt who might be in imminent peril. Naturally, I would have preferred it to be the sister, but never let it be said that a Benson stands by whatever the age or sex of the needy. There was a danger that it was Ronald's own room, but I saw him now as being more of a shady conservatory sort of chap.

The rock crumped off the window with a soft thwuck as the pliant materials of the pseudoglass absorbed its momentum, very unhelpfully for corn-haired sister waking purposes. I felt my momentum similarly waning: the battle against the invaders, if there were any, seemed suddenly extremely inconvenient to join. Nevertheless I steeled myself – was this why my ancestors possibly came over with Duke William of Normandy? A Benson must be a benison to his fellows. (I have no idea incidentally, to be honest, if that's what my ancestors in fact did, but I have made a memorandum at some point during eternity to look them up and find out. Genealogy ought to be as simple now as just asking your dad – or mum – and getting them to repeat the process until family feuds intervene, although if I recall correctly that was more or less the project Lewis was telling us about just now. Which I suppose just shows that Great Minds Think Alike.)

What the situation was calling out for was a half-open window and a ladder – and luckily, with the kind of coincidence which we are often too scornful of in the popular drama, such things were to hand. At least

one was to hand, to whit the ladder, being propped up against the side of the house, and the other was at the end of it. The upper end that is, not a window acting in the capacity of a coal cellar. To shinny up it (the ladder) was therefore the work of a moment, and I was able to stick my head through the open casement past a pair of green curtains embroidered with gold snakes (rather risqué I thought them for the Mortimers) and make out in the irksome gloaming a shape with a distinctly yellowish tinge about the upper cranium bundled in the bed. What ho! I thought, the possibly endangered Mabel, and I was about to address her in manly yet reassuring tones, when the door to the bedroom was pushed open from the other side, and an elderly buffer in a long willy winky nightgown and ancient night-cap, entered and showed every sign of being about to divest himself further of his accoutrements and dive in.

I fancy myself a broad-minded man, but I was shocked at a young woman being the passing plaything of this elderly rogue. 'Hi,' I shouted, and I meant it to sound as the man's own conscience or his mother might have sounded, calling out from her grave – or more likely of course, in the City, just calling out – to rebuke his advantage-taking. He spun around, and the yellow-capped figure sat up, revealing an elderly, violently permed woman, of nevertheless a startlingly large-bosomed build, with only the skimpiest French folderol (is the word negligence? If not, it ought to be) draped over her. With a sudden clarity I realised this was the wrong room – maybe even, for neither party seemed in any sense to have lost their interest in human interaction to the passion-stealing pomegranates, in the wrong house. I took the easy way out by falling out of the window.

It was technically more of a slide than a fall. I was still on the ladder and managed a very creditable two-step stilt-walk before the thing decided to come to bits, dropping me with a breath- stealing 'oof', onto the flat annexe roof of what I now perceived was the real number 27. I don't know if you've been to the road, but it is genuinely confusing and I wouldn't put it past children to have moved the numbers round, although I admit it is a trifle unlikely that they put them back while I was laddering.

The flat roof was largish, greyish, and jolly comforting next to the skin in comparison with air and the sudden prospect of ground. I gathered my energies, if not – as my critics have been known to say – my wits. Creakily raising myself on my forearms, I spotted a skylight affair, set into the roof's midpoint, and beetled over to it to have a quick look in.

The room was a bedroom of some kind, with what appeared to be the debris of a suburban childhood of possibly a few years after my own. A train-set, Hornby if I wasn't mistaken, was partly constructed on the floor, and piles of collectables of various descriptions filled the corners. The room had a small cornucopia device, out of which these bits and bobs had probably been spun and which, if it was like my own, would also provide drink and foodstuffs, and a small toilet-disposal-unit of the magic-make-poo-and-things-vanish kind that so entranced all us lower-technology folk in the first few months of Resurrection. It had one other obvious thing as in it as well, and it lacked one other obvious thing: it had an occupant, viz Ronald Mortimer, and it didn't appear to have a door. He was asleep in pink bunny pyjamas, with his thumb firmly wedged in his mouth. I tried to bang on the skylight to wake him, but it was as impervious as everything else and didn't even vibrate. It was locked with a bolt from the inside.

There was only one thing for it. I would have to ring the bell. A drainpipe and a clever use of suspenders having brought me to the ground, I approached the front door with some nerves. I like a party, but I like it when the host knows to expect me and some other jolly chaps have started the singing before I arrive, and I can just add my volume to the rising hubbub, without making a singular ass of myself. A Benson doesn't push in, except, alas, when he must.

The bell push announced 'No hawkers or circulars', but being on the lean side, and having left my goshawk in the mews, I pressed it, readying the foot for a quick wedge in the jam. After some time during which I distinctly heard two voices raised in argument, the door was opened by Mabel. Ah, Mabel. Hair like a cornfield and, it transpired, a voice like a combine-harvester. A natural for a lead part in *Hoot!*. Jane's habit of pointing and howling re-endeared itself to me like dew after a drought.

'Is Ronald in?' I asked. 'We're all in a bit of a tizz about the prep for the gala, and I think he might have left some Red Leicester melting in the storeroom with a pack of ocelots.' Subtle, you see. I looked for signs that she might have gone the same way as her brother: vegetable in public, rabbit in the bedroom. She swept me with her eyes, which remained mercifully fully in situ between her forehead and her nose (no offense, sir – on you stalks look good), and the fat tip of her tongue moistened her lips.

'My brother is indisposed.' She hesitated. 'And I blame you and your ridiculous Club for it. He should stay home with his trains like he always used to.' Her eyes flashed. 'But you can come in for a cocktail if you like.' I stepped through the threshold, feeling a little like Jonathan Harker doing the rounds of Carpathian hospitality with only one neck to offer his interlocutors.

Inside the house I got a better look at Mabel. Determined was a word that struck me; also Capable and Nearly Indecent. She leaned seductively against a pillar, her night attire was sheer black shiny stuff, and her skin was as greeny-white and pale as that ointment they used to use for wasp-stings when I was a boy. I'm sorry if the simile is no immediate help to you, but just root through a pharmacopeia when you have a moment, and refer to Zam-Buk and you'll see. I was wondering if she was a Bodysnatcher right up to the moment when she made a grab for part of my body that I hadn't really been concentrating on. Her breath was hot on my neck, and as she ran her scarlet-nailed fingers down my face I fancy I blushed as red as her lipstick.

'Really, Citizen Mortimer, I say!' I said – and I think that made my position quite clear. 'I really must insist you take me to your brother, I'm very worried about him.' I was, for although even a body- absorbing vegetable from space might find Mabel rather too hearty a snack for me to be able to retain my earlier concern for her, there had still been something very wrong about the Ronald I had seen earlier at the Club, and something even wronger about him now. There was the mystery of the orange glop, the clue of the mewling hiss, and now I thought about it, the oddly minty scent of the man's shirt cuffs. Then there was the childlike Ronald sucking his thumb in the sealed room. Were they one and the same, and if so what Jekyll-and-Child metamorphosis was upon the House of Mortimer?

I was at a loss. Prising myself from Mabel's grasp before I ran into the possible danger of losing anything else to her solicitude, I began the business of edging away from a too-eager hostess which is difficult enough at a dinner party, still less in the Spook House of Nonesuch Park.

I was so engrossed in backing away from her that I didn't see the door to the next room swing open behind me, though I did have time to hear it creak, and her shout 'No!', before a meaty fist grabbed me by the shoulder and spun me round. This was the minty form of the false Ronald, or perhaps his clean and fresh Hyde alter ego, bunny suit abandoned – although he'd hardly had time to wake, change, and DIY a quick doorway before confronting me. Actually, the Hyde idea was a bit of a non- starter, and I can only put my considering it for a moment down to the substantial stress of what had turned out to be a rather trying evening.

A closer inspection of the man's features, which he seemed all too keen to provide me with by positioning his gleaming teeth around the Benson face with a view to pulling it off and handing it to me, possibly on some form of salver or platter, confirmed my initial instinctive assessment. The previous-viewed *I. of the B.S.s* may have lead me a bit astray in my deductive reasonings, but that this man was not Ronald Mortimer I had no doubt. He impostered shamelessly and I defied anyone to say he did not.

I must have yelped the latter sentiment aloud or been the victim of some telepathic ingress, for Mabel chimed in. 'Of course he's not an imposter, you fool. This is Ronald as he should have been, the brother I could have looked up to for his strength and vigour. This is Donald Mortimer, Ronald's twin, who… died when he was born.' She sniffled alarmingly, and my heart sank as I contemplated having my limbs torn from each other while Mabel sobbed counterpoint over the masculine endowments of her and Ronald's Resurrected sibling.

The time for pummelling seemed to have passed with Mabel's keening, but I was still effortlessly dragged behind the muscular twin (whose ability to cram his physique into the slender Ronald's clothes I was inclined to regard as a triumph of Swedish Exercises or origami. If that's the Japanese martial art, I mean). Although my bump of direction had had one or two bumps during the night, I could tell I was being taken to see Ronald. It was, however, a meeting for which I had rather lost any savour. While I wasn't being hurt directly, and I wasn't, I now recalled, in any danger in the absolute sense, I was definitely being moved by gentle but insistent main force. Donald just positioned his rocky musculature so that in order to breathe I bounced off him, and then moved forward. I was being avalanched towards Ronald.

Now, though those of us who gaily don the soup and fish and adhere to the code of a simpler age voluntarily shun the higher technologies, this is by no means an absolute fashion in Younger London. It's not of course for me to judge, but I'm not sure I approve. For one thing it somehow takes the edge off the Club's loving recreations of everything Earlyish Twentieth-Century, for another it lets people get hold of bally things like 'The One Direction Tie-In Novelty Door: it works in one direction, simply fit it to an existing entrance or outside wall for hours of fun'. I'm not sure who One Direction were, but if I ever come across them one afternoon in eternity I will have words about their ill advised mid-twenty-first century 'marketing', as I think it's called. One last outward breath from the bulky Donald, and I was precipitated through the supposedly amusing unipermiable membrane. (I have looked it up since and discovered it works by a form of Maxwell's Demon, which I suppose is a technology indistinguishable from magic.) From the other side it formed a perfect 'chameleon seal' with the door frame, explaining why I couldn't see a door earlier. Ahead of me, the embunnied form of Ronald Mortimer snored the snores of childhood satisfaction.

I think I must have dozed off too – it had been a long night – for I was presently awakened by a hissing. For a moment I thought it was the still unexplained noise I'd heard from outside the storeroom. Maybe even now a pod effectively concealed under the Lego drifts was pilfering my consciousness. Indeed, if I was already a bad copy of another, how would I know? Would I feel the same? A sudden desire to point at someone and open my mouth while making a howling noise welled up in me like champagne from the hands of a racing-driver. In another second I would have succumbed, but suddenly the hissing resolved itself into a familiar voice, that of Ronald Mortimer.

'I say, Hal old fruit, you have to help me old man. Mabel's come over all Aunty and locked me in here for my own good. She says Donald can make a go of the P.O.T.P.C. and go into a proper business, and then I can wear a dress-suit and be a junior partner. Well, I'm scuppered if I will. The PO.T.P.C. is my dream. Ever since I first read Wodehouse.'

This was a turn-up. I had thought Ronald a mere functionary, and one with an oily smug manner about his hitherto resolutely non-minty person. It had never occurred to me that without a humourless and resolutely strait-laced Club Secretary all manner of opportunities for japery and conviviality would be lost on the

Club members. Why, even a simple game of umbrella golf in the foyer would be as dust and ashes without the shout of 'Cave! Ronny!'. A feeling of fellowship crept over me but there was one offence of which I had to seek some explanation. The honour of the Bensons dead and gone… and er, presumably back… demanded it.

'This is all very well Ronald,' I levelled, 'and I fully intend to help you come what may, but I must ask you to justify your attitude towards me in the past. You have sneered at me sir, for no other reason than that I, a poor working-class man in my origins, have dared to strive for a better tomorrow, where anyone can aspire to upper-class dumb-chummery and the glorious clink of cocktail on, er, tonsils. (I might have gone a bit astray there, not having metal tonsils, but he seemed to let it pass.)

Standing up, his plush bunny costume thankfully draped over his slim form – lord alone knows what it would have looked like on Donald, or worse Mabel – he brushed a tear from his eyes. 'I never knew you felt that way, Citizen Benson,' he said, his apology (for such I intuited it was to be) couched in an appropriately Wodehousian formality. He bit his lip. 'I was jealous.' I must have goggled, and possibly my mouth fell open confirming my non-metallic innards.

'You had every advantage, you see, all this must come so naturally to you – to all the people native-born to these few hallowed years that the Club represents. You can do naturally what I have had to cog and cram for. I could never dare act the part of a drone, the most I could hope for was to be a supporting character.'

'You and Mabel, and um, Donald aren't from around then, then?' I asked, sounding as if I'd developed the habit of repeating words.

'Oh no, we're from the mid-twenty-fourth originally. Ghastly time. I set off for Younger London as soon as I realised that earlier idyll had been recreated here. Unfortunately first Mabel and then Donald came after me.' He looked thoughtful. 'I always expected it of Mabel – what's an eternity without someone to boss about? – but it didn't get really bad until Donald turned up. She was like that when we were alive too, right until she burst a blood vessel during an argument about prawns. It was Donald that surprised me rather, not that he'd been Resurrected, but that he should bother to seek us out. It's not as if he could have had any memory of us, he died in a birthing accident.'

I refrained from telling him that Donald might be a pod, it seemed more important to take our leave. 'Think no more about past ill-feeling, Ronny,' I said. 'For reasons connected with odd and peculiar goings-on at the Club as well as your freedom and mine, we need to get out of here. I take it it's not so simple as shouting for the neighbours. What have you tried?'

It turned out he'd tried a lot of things, but cunningly Mabel and Donald had set fairly severe child- locks on the cornucopia, which explained the things that filled the room. (I also thought it explained the sleepwear, but I later found they were indeed Ronald's. Oh well, Honi soit qui mal y pense, and all that.) He couldn't dial up any form of communication or anything he might make a hole in a wall with, or even anything too 'adult'. It seemed hopeless. I fingered the band I always wore at my wrist: W.W.J.D., 'What Would Jeeves Do?' The inspiration when it came was obvious.

The cornucopia would produce harmless toys. To dial up another One Direction Tie-In Novelty Door was a matter of moments. To, attach it to an outside wall and, ah, hop through it, another. The inner chameleon seal of the membrane would leave our escape a locked room mystery for the Mabel- Donald axis.

Outside it was now late early morning and, as Ronald and I fled through the outskirts of Nonesuch Park, prepared at any time to jump gamely into the path of a passing charabanc, in the hope of a ride back to the metrop., I could not help but wonder at the mystery of sisterly and brotherly love. I mean, I've been resurrected a good many years (as has everyone else, yes, Citizen Quickwit, but what about the City-born eh, you've forgotten them!) and apart from a card at Christmas from my mum, I can count the number of relatives who have bothered to look me up on the fingers of a hooved mammal, but Mabel had tracked Ronald down with every intent of taking up the management of his life exactly where her sudden apoplexy had broken it off. It makes a chap think. One thing I thought I'm a bit ashamed of, but I couldn't help but wonder if the said apoplexy had been entirely natural. Mabel would have been a trial to a quiet man with an unsorted stamp album and a bunny fixation. Shortly after that we caught a cab, for which I was grateful. A long walk with still more intimately revealing conversation might well have been too much.

When we arrived back at the Club at nine in the morning, I hurried to show Ronald my hideous discoveries. In the daylight, the Halloween nausea of the night before was still apparent, but it was more familiar than ever, as were the mewling, irate cries. I flung open the door to reveal a shattered pumpkin, and a bevy of cats.

Ronald tore at his thinning hair. 'Oh, Hal,' he moaned – we really were getting on better since I'd rescued him from his sister's soft imprisonment – 'this is awful! The Earl will be here to present the prizes at the country members' gala tomorrow, and when he finds I've let the cats get at his special pumpkin, he'll refuse to participate, he'll be affronted, he'll call us ineffectual and third-rate. I'll never be able to lift up my head at the Club Secretaries' Club again. The Club Secretary of the Club Secretaries' Club will strike my name from the rolls and snip off my silver buttons.' His voice was breaking with barely suppressed emotion, and I felt a need to offer him some manly reassurance.

'Surely there must be something we can do. Is this nobleman remarkably fond of his pumpkin? Might he be inclined to laugh it off with a merry quip and a remark that we might as well have soup?' I could see that I was bearing no balm to Gilead.

'Like them!' he squeaked. 'He's obsessed with them, and obsessed with the idea that cats will get at them. I thought he was wrong about that, but these kittens have torn it to shreds! What on earth can I tell him? He's going to give a talk about it!'

I considered. Was it possible? Had my post-lifetime emulation of the Holy Plum given me this glorious opportunity? I hardly dared ask, but I had to. 'This Earl, is he possibly the E. of E.?'

Ronald scowled, and I was pleased to see his natural sneering back in place. 'Of course not – there never was a real one. But he is a method actor – a Remake – dedicated to reliving the part. That's why he's such a catch for the P.O.T.P.C.' He hesitated, and his face lit up with the light of a drowning camel grasping for a final straw. 'Why, do you know him? He's doing the tour of all the Non-Working Men's Clubs since he was forged, he's talked about Pumpkins across the City itself.

And now,' his lip trembled as if he was blowing an invisible trumpet, 'he hasn't got a pumpkin to talk about.'

I adopted a hawklike profile and the air of a man of mystery. 'Trust me, Ronald, if you're right about his dedication to the part, and we can get one or two things together, I think we can settle this to your satisfaction, and even to his.' I sniffed. And then two and two put themselves together into a bespoke foursome, as I recalled that of which Ronald's erstwhile double had smelt. 'Catnip!'

'What?' Ronald boggled. As far as the H.-L.P. and the A. of an M. of M. went, it was clear that in his eyes I was now only a slouch hat and a cloak short of the Shadow. I lightly sketched out my reasoning, with a debonair smile. 'This pumpkin did not exert its strange fascination for our feline chums of its own unalloyed nature. It has been smeared with cat-alluring herbs of the most seductive kind. Smeared, I say, by your supposed twin brother.'

'Supposed?' he quavered.

I stopped, for in my eagerness to reach what I now saw as a shining success glimmering before me, I realised that I had dashed his hopes somewhat. Although his putative brother had proved to be not a helpmate and a fellow spirit – someone who might be able to ginger him up and give him the chutzpah to strike out away from Mabel on his own account – he still thought of him as kin. I wondered if Mabel had been deceived. She had said as much, but looking back, her interest in Donald might well have gone beyond seeing him as a means to exert her control over her brother, to cut him off from his 'clubs' and his 'outside interests'. I patted Ronald on the shoulder. There would be time for investigation later, we had a Club event to save. I fumbled for the mot juste. 'We can still make this gala a success – chin up, old bean.'

(I say, I'm just going to narrate this last bit, a tad more impersonally. Don't want to blow my own laurels, too lavishly. Not good form.)

The Earl, a splendidly thin and vague example of the form, ruffled his notes, and surveyed the assembled members of the Parasites On The Proletariat Club. He was, both by personal inclination and by role, a fluffy-minded man, but he took his gardening seriously, and he had been touched by the evident solicitude of the Club Secretary (the man seemed more nervous than he did himself) and his young friend – what was his name, Benton? They had suggested that the appetites as it were of the assembly would be whetted most effectively for the display of the Great Pumpkin by an element of magical theatrics. A blue-and-gold cloth over the Pumpkin would be drawn back at the moment of what the younger man called 'the greatest psychological impact'. The noble speaker had nodded sagely at that, in the hope of concealing that he was still trying to remember the meaning of 'psychological'. He liked that phrase 'Great Pumpkin' though, it showed the proper spirit, but inwardly he was aware of a restive sensation concerning the massive vegetable that had for the last two years filled his waking hours and his tired nature's restoring dreams. It was a triumph, to be sure. But after all, in the final analysis, what did it do? He felt a curious certainty that a great step in his life was soon coming – even though, like every Remake who follows the career of a great man or woman, whether fictional or real, he did not of course allow the feeling to interfere with his present actions, nor permit himself the crass act of 'reading ahead'.

The moment came when the cloth was whisked off behind him. The crowd goggled and awed in a most gratifying way. 'The, ah, great size of the, um, Pumpkin,' he was saying, 'is not a thing a gardener can afford to take for granted.' There was a moment's hush, and then – for there is all too often in the adoring crowd one dirty-faced boy prepared to criticise the King's Spring Fashions – a voice shouted out. 'That ain't no Pumpkin, that's a Pig. Coo, it's huge!'

(And this is me, as me again)

The rest as they say, was the end of history, and I really can't take much credit for it. It was clear to me that the Remake actor was still in the early stages of his portraiture of a life, still addicted to Pumpkins, and not yet touched by the true thrill that would make him one of the most beloved characters in the Literature of Younger London and the Ages. When he turned and looked into the mild eyes of the hastily acquired Pig, I knew that like stout Cortez he wouldn't throw away a pearl worth more than all his tribe. It was love at first grunt. Thereafter Pumpkins were a closed book to him. He never even enquired as to the squishy demise of his former favourite. Ah, Pumpkin, remember thou art mortal!

And that was that. Ronald moved out of Mabel's, moved into the P.O.T.P.C., and became a genial and

much-regarded Club Secretary, whose impersonation of a goose looking for its eggs never fails to send a frisson through an otherwise jaundiced audience. I believe his pseudobrother moved into number 27, taken as he was with the moody Mabel's scarlet nail varnish and golden locks – and possibly, there being no reasoning in such matters, with her other charms as well. Still, perhaps a more muscular yet still compliant version of her brother was what Mabel had always really wanted, and why shouldn't a Remake be happy?

I suspect, you see, that he must have been a Remake himself, made from pure raw biomass to resemble Ronald or Donald, with the intention of the dread powers behind him that he should use the likeness to spike the Pumpkin with catnip before releasing the felines. He probably expected that the Earl, whose irrational conviction that cats would infallibly wantonly destroy pumpkins was well known, would unquestioning accept a cat-based calamity, for which Ronald and the P.O.T.P.C. would take the blame, rather than seeing the events for the deliberate act of sabotage they obviously had been.

His Evil Paymasters? Anyone on the Celebrity Pumpkin circuit, or even another E. of E. Remake attempting to see off a rising competitor. It's not all harps and halos in Utopia I'm afraid, even when it does all come out all right. Another drink?

3

'I say, that came off pretty much tickety-boo in the end,' says Hal Benson to Akroates as he struggles to remember another, equally complicated drinks order. 'Bit of a relief, really. Standing up in front of other chaps like that gives the old nervous tissues a bit of a wracking, don't you find? Oh – and a Rum State of Affairs, please.' He peers inside his wallet. The moth which flies out is not legal biotender. 'I say, you couldn't…'

Akroates sighs. 'I'll start a tab.'

'Dashed good of you,' says Harry. 'No, not one of nature's public speakers, yours truly. I'm more of the retiring type if you follow me – not that retiring's something any of us can look forward to, under the circumstances. Can't expect the City-born to support us aged ancestors for the rest of eternity, now can we? Although our doorman at the club retired, old Wigbert. So he told us, anyway – we had a whip-round for a gold watch and all the usual gubbins. Even threw a party in his honour, though now I come to think of it I'm not entirely sure he was actually invited. Three months later, "Cuckoo" Summerisle heard from a distant aunt of his that Wigbert had gone and joined some commune of Bolshie revolutionaries over in Bogdanovgrad District! Well, I mean to say. Reggie had to have all the locks changed at the club, in case the fellow came back and blew the place sky-high.'

'That would have been a nuisance,' Akroates sympathises, as the he pours a vodka-and-liquid-fertiliser. 'That'll be 260 discs,' he says, adding when Hal blenches, 'On the tab, of course.' He hopes that one of Benson's better-endowed friends can be persuaded to pick it up by the end of the evening, or he may have to call on the good offices of the Calafia constabulary.

'Dashed kind,' Hal repeats. 'I say, are you related to a cyclops called Ojan-somethingorother who lives in Nuevosantander in Mappamundi? I swear you look just like him. If you like I could –'

Akroates shakes his head. 'I gather we all look quite similar to binocular people.'

Hal has the grace to look embarrassed. 'Rude of me, I know. Talking shop as usual. I say, though, that cove's face is familiar too,' he adds, nodding at a sardonic-looking man in a trenchcoat and a fedora, a cigarette dangling louchely from his lower lip. 'Some kind of superhero or wizard or something, I think. I'd need to check the Omniweb.'

Arianrhod calls for silence, and as Harry scurries back with his tray of drinks, Akroates is surprised to see that the next storyteller, a young human-standard woman – he suspects genuinely young, rather than a resurrectee – is another whom he had pegged as strictly audience material. He saw her earlier, a petite brunette in sober clothes with an immodest price-tag, sitting quietly attentive as Lewis spoke his piece, alone but for a small personal drone.

That machine buzzes unhappily now, but stays in place guarding the young woman's wine, as she abandons it for the mikedrone at the fire-pit.

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ETERNITY IS JUST FOR STARTERS

Susannah Tiller

When I was little, I used to spend a lot of time in the kitchen. I say 'kitchen', but it wasn't just one room, it was a whole labyrinth of them. The actual room where all the cooking was done, the pantry, the rooms where the servants lived, cool rooms, and more. It was its own little world down there. And Mrs Gladstone, the housekeeper, was like its own Resident. Whenever I went downstairs, she'd always be in the middle of everything. Even if she was off in a corner somewhere adding up accounts, the staff would still come to her, and ask her advice, and make sure that she knew what was going on.

Somehow she managed to keep track of it all. I'd watch, amazed. She still used a pencil and notebook, the way she'd done in her first lifetime. My father had offered to fit out the kitchen any way she wanted, with any kind of gadget you could imagine, but she'd refused. 'Very kind of you, sir,' she said. 'But it's how I was raised, and how I'll keep working.'

So, she'd be sitting there with her notebook, adding up the accounts, or making a list of things to buy. Of course she could have had everything delivered, that was no problem. And sometimes she did. But mostly Mrs Gladstone liked to go to the markets a couple of times a week to buy things herself.

I remember she took me with her once. It must have been school holidays, or perhaps I was between tutors, since I was wandering around the house trying to think of something to do. I guess my father was on one of his business trips, because I know he would have said 'no' if he'd been around to ask. I didn't want to ask anyone, but Mrs Gladstone insisted, so I slowly made my way upstairs to see if I could find out where my mother had slept last night.

She told me that it was our game of hide-and-seek. That every night she would wander around the house until she found a different sofa, or a different chaise lounge to curl up in. That I would have to try to find her before she woke. At that point she and my father still pretended that they were sharing a bed, and a bedroom, even though I must have been the only person who believed it. These days they've stopped pretending, and I stopped believing it years ago.

Anyway, I finally found my mother in the music room, curled up in the big armchair that Mr Markham sat in when he gave me my piano lessons. The lid of the piano was open, and there was a half full glass sitting on the top. Red liquid, the same as in the glass, spanned an octave from middle C, bright against the delicate ivory of the keys. I stood in the doorway for a moment, frowning. I wasn't even allowed to drink water while I was playing the piano.

I walked over, picked up the glass, and gently, very gently wiped the keys clean before closing the piano lid. But I wasn't quite gentle enough. My mother stirred, and her eyes flickered open. They wandered around the room for a moment, before they fixed on me. They were pretty eyes, when they weren't bloodshot. 'Oh, Lennie,' she said, smiling. Her words slurred together. It sounded more like

'*OhLenniecouldjabringmemuhglass?*' I held out the glass to her, just an inch or so out of reach, and mumbled '*MrsGladstone'sgoin'shoppingcanIgotoo?*' I thought that if I got the words out as quickly as I could, she wouldn't have time to say no.

'Sure,' she mumbled, her eyes fixed on the glass. Her voice was low and flat. 'Mummy loves you.'

I whispered something that might have been 'I love you', or 'Thank you', or 'Don't spill the drink', and passed the glass over to her. She had already drained it as I closed the door behind her.

Halfway down the staircase, I ran into Ponting, the butler. 'Good morning, Miss Lena,' he said, his eyes twinkling. I smiled. I liked Ponting. When my father and mother weren't looking, he'd sometimes give me rides through the corridors on the wheeled trolley used for carrying silverware.

‘Hello, Ponting,’ I replied. Then I figured that I should probably tell him about my mother. I’d heard my father say it, often enough that I could recite it word for word, although I tripped up on some of them. I even let my voice get high and low at the same places his did. ‘Oh, Ponting,’ I said, pretending that I was as tall and strong and dignified as my father. ‘My mother is resting in the music room. Could you please make sure she eats something?’

He gave a little half bow, from the waist, the kind that he would give to either of my parents. At the low point of the bow, his face was almost level with mine, and I saw something sad in his eyes.

‘Certainly, Miss Lena. And may I get you something to eat?’

I smiled. ‘No thank you, Ponting, I’m going to the market with Mrs Gladstone.’

‘Very good.’ As I passed him, I thought I heard him whisper something that sounded like ‘Poor little bugger’. I hurried downstairs. I didn’t want Mrs Gladstone to leave without me. But she was waiting for me, and the kitchen was full of the smell of baking bread. When she saw me, she smiled, and handed me over some buttered slices. They tasted incredible. As I munched on them, she rummaged around in a cupboard, and found an old cloak and pinafore, the kind of things one of the maids would wear. ‘Helena,’ she said, quietly. I listened carefully, because usually she and the staff only used my full name if my parents were around. ‘It’s probably best if you leave your drone at home, and you don’t wear your good dress. Please put these on. That way, anyone who sees you won’t know you’re Mavrikos Dmitri’s daughter. They’ll think you’re one of the staff.’ I wasn’t sure why that would make such a difference, but I was so happy to be going with her, that I would have worn my nightgown if she’d asked me.

It was one of the best days of my life. I didn’t realise that Newtopia could be so busy, so brilliantly full of noises and colours and smells, even so early in the morning. Everything seemed clearer and sharper in the morning light, and it tasted better, too. When they saw I was with Mrs Gladstone, one or two of the stallholders slipped me little bits and pieces to eat, like an apple, or a little pastry.

At some stage, we were sitting in the back of one of the shops, munching on a couple of biscuits. I think I had been complaining that my feet were sore, and my arms were tired from carrying groceries. So, Mrs Gladstone had given in, and we’d stopped for a little while. We were both drinking a cup of tea, although mine was more milk and sugar than tea. Mrs Gladstone raised her cup to her lips, then lowered it an inch or two. ‘Lena,’ she said. ‘I want you to remember this. Remember the people you’ve met today, and the work they do.’

And I do remember it. It was the first time that I’d ever really walked anywhere. I was so used to being driven everywhere, mostly in the Bentley or the Road Messiah, that this walk seemed to take forever.

These days, I walk anywhere and everywhere I can, and tonight is no exception. It’s a beautiful night to be out. Then again, every night is a beautiful night in Newtopia. Some people say that the technology that keeps the District running also keeps the weather just right. Others say that the District grew up here because the weather was always perfect, and so the rich and the powerful were drawn here, the way moths are drawn to a flame, or flies are drawn to a rotting piece of meat.

It’s a little chilly, so I’m grateful for the big hooded jacket. The main reason I put it on was to cover my head and face, but the warmth is also nice. Around me, the smart screens on the buildings are flickering from channel to channel. Some of it’s being streamed from Teletopia, others are the local channels. There’s some waterfalls, which are obviously one of the nature channels. Then one of the shopping channels, with some gorgeous, gorgeous gold necklaces. And then, as I’m imagining how one of those necklaces might look on me, the channels start to flick over to one of the political stations.

The Resident has just finished another political debate. The cameras show him leaving the Polis, and brushing past a group of waiting reporters and camera drones. I keep watching in case they show him doing something interesting, or saying something, but all that happens is that he gets into a limousine and is driven

away. Apparently the debate didn't go so well, or the opinion polls are down, or something.

As I watch the smart screen, a camera drone stops doing lazy circles above the square, and hovers directly above me. Since I have stopped moving, I stand out from the rest of the crowd, and it is clearly curious about my motives. I can see the Omega News logo printed on it.

We size each other up, its many-faceted eyes looking at my own, hidden behind tinted glasses. With the glasses, a hooded top, and a baseball cap, I am unremarkable, and unrecognisable. My own drone perches on my shoulder, where it has been whispering directions in my ear. The camera drone fixes its gaze on it, and issues a metallic chirp, a hopeful query. But my drone keeps quiet. I keep my privacy settings locked down, so my drone doesn't talk to strangers. After a second or two of silence, the camera drone glides away in search of something more interesting.

I smile, and keep walking.

For a few minutes, at least for as long as it takes me to walk to the restaurant, I am not on display. I am anonymous, and unworthy of interest. I like it that way.

The dinners have become a Friday night tradition. It started our first year at University, when we all had tutorials on Friday afternoon, then a gap of a few hours, then a late-night lecture. Some people went to the library to study or to catch up on their work. Others went shopping, or out for dinner. I used to compromise, and take a book to one of the cafes, and try and get some reading done while having dinner. Slowly, over the course of the semester, I realised I was seeing the same group at the same restaurants every week, and one night Alix and some of the others invited me to share their table. The group was a mixture. There were City-borns, like me, who were studying for the first time. Then there were the resurrectees. Some of them had been at University since before I was born, but kept on going because they said it kept them young at heart.

That was a couple of years ago. A few of us have graduated, and none of us have the Friday night lecture any more, but we're still working our way through the restaurants, one at a time. Last week it was Carats. I've only just stopped finding little bits and pieces of gold leaf stuck between my teeth. That stuff sticks worse than wagyu beef, and it doesn't even taste that good. If I hadn't seen it in the chocolate tart, I wouldn't even have known it was there. I don't think we'll be going back there anytime soon.

Then the week before that, I can't even remember the name, but I know that I ate elephant, with ivory cutlery that I got to take home afterwards, and Will had Bengal tiger. It was a cool night out. Great food, great drinks, and great decorations. Will and I had a photo taken, a really old-style photograph, where we dressed up as hunters, and posed with a fake tiger and a fake gun.

Tonight it's the Hobo Hangout, the newest, coolest theme restaurant in Newtopia. It only opened a couple of weeks ago, but the buzz around it is incredible. It's tiny, tucked away in a back street a few blocks back from the restaurant district. The food is supposed to be out of this world. And it only does two sittings a night, with a set menu. These days Alix is working for a marketing company, and through a friend of a friend – and I guess some money – she's managed to get us a booking for the Friday night late sitting. I've been looking forward to it all week.

My drone spreads its wings and takes flight. Ahead of me, I can see Will and the rest of the group, their drones buzzing and hovering around them. Mine reaches the group, and a couple of them give welcoming chirps and beeps. I casually slip off the baseball cap and glasses, and stash them into my backpack. Will's hand slides comfortably into mine, I give him a peck on the cheek, and the rest of the group nods amiably. All except Alix, who looks puzzled. 'We were looking out for you, but we didn't see your car.'

'Oh, we couldn't get a park in front, so Ponting dropped me off in one of the side streets,' I lie. They get driven everywhere. Most people who live in Newtopia do. They think I do, too. I don't know if they'd understand that I like to walk.

From the outside, the Hobo Hangout doesn't look like much of a restaurant. There's two big, industrial doors, covered in yellow tape that reads 'Condemned!' and 'Crime Scene Do Not Cross' and a few other

things. Other than my group, there's a lot of people milling around. I guess some of them have reservations, and some of them wish they had reservations. But there doesn't seem to be a proper queue, or anything like that. We can't get close to the doors, so we take up a position across the street, near a dumpster, and some piles of old boxes and rags. The early sitting should have finished half an hour ago, so I'm hoping we won't have to wait too long.

The stir in the crowd is so gradual that it takes me a couple of moments to realise something has changed, something has happened. But there's a slow movement in the crowd, a ripple away from the centre of the street, like the tide pulling back from the shore. And a swarm of drones – camera drones from the news stations, and personal drones – move towards whatever it is that's creating the fuss. And slowly, eventually, I can see what's attracting everyone's attention. A horse-drawn carriage comes into view, gleaming gold and dotted with all kinds of coloured gems. It's one of the most beautiful things I've ever seen. There's a driver at the front, and a footman at the back, both dressed as though they've stepped out of a fairy tale. And even though the carriage blinds are firmly drawn, the wealth, the sudden mass of camera drones, and the fact that the carriage is now appearing on all the smart screens around us point to just one thing. Just one person.

'Wow,' someone says. 'It's the Resident!'

I watch, interested. It's the first time I've seen him in public for a while. You used to see him going to movie premieres, going shopping with his wife, and that sort of thing, but lately things have been different. I guess it started to change when the campaign period started. He's coming up for re- election in a couple of months. For as long as I can remember, he's been elected unopposed, but now someone is actually running against him.

Elizabeth Gawler was a suffragette in Edwardian England. She gave a lecture to our history class once, talking about the protest marches, and the hunger strikes, and the prison guards forcing food through a tube in her nose so she wouldn't starve to death. That gave me chills up and down my spine. She actually died throwing herself under someone's horse during one of the protests. I am not sure how that got the message across, but she thinks it was worthwhile. I wanted to ask her what it felt like in those final moments.

Instead, I kept quiet. There are times when I don't like reminding people that I'm City-born. Don't get me wrong, I love Newtopia. It's gorgeous, and there's so much to do here. Like the restaurants, and the shopping, and the University. But all I've ever known is City life. There's two parts to that.

All I've ever known is the City, and all I've ever known is life. Will won't tell me how he died, even though I've asked him a couple of times. I just want to know – did it hurt? Did he know what was happening? Was he scared? – but he won't say. He saw how I reacted when we had to put our dog Cholmondeley to sleep – I cried for two days – so he hasn't wanted to tell me any stories like that.

Anyway. Elizabeth died fighting, and was reborn fighting. She has a lot of support. A few nights ago, when I wandered into the kitchen to take a break from studying, I found Ponting, the new housekeeper, and some of the other staff watching one of Elizabeth's speeches on someone's drone. They were all clustered around the tiny screen, but when they realised I was there, they switched it off immediately, and looked around at each other. I felt really uncomfortable, especially when one of the younger maids wiped her eyes, and wouldn't look at me. They all looked amongst each other, and then Ponting stepped forward. 'Can we help you, Miss Dmitri?'

I didn't know why he was being so formal. 'I just wanted something to eat, Ponting,' I said. He glanced sideways at the young maid, and she nodded, and headed for the pantry, wringing her apron between her hands. 'I'll get it myself,' I protested.

He looked at me for a moment, then he sighed. 'Miss – Lena. You know your father is a strong supporter of the Resident.'

I nodded. He's been to dinner at our house once or twice. I wasn't allowed to join them at table, so I spent the night in the kitchen. It made me laugh to think that the Resident might have eaten a salad that I'd helped prepare.

'Well – we are not. He doesn't speak for everyone in Newtopia. But if your father knew what we thought…'

At that point, the maid returned with a plate, and the awkwardness came down over us again. The atmosphere downstairs has changed so much since Mrs Gladstone retired. There never used to be any problems with me eating there. But I didn't want to make things worse, so I took the plate up to my room, and ate up there instead. While I was eating, I watched Elizabeth's speech on my own drone, pausing it and replaying it over and over again so I could think about what she was saying.

I'm snapped out of my daydream by a gentle nudge in my ribs, from Will. 'How cool is this?' he says, pointing. I watch as the footman opens the carriage door, and folds down a little set of steps. Illuminated by the glow from dozens of drones, streaming this live around Newtopia and beyond, the Resident steps out. He's wearing a smile that doesn't quite reach his eyes, one hand already raised to acknowledge the expected applause (and there is applause, but maybe not as much as he expects), the other smoothing down his shirt. He's dressed casually, at least by his standards. His jeans have geometrically precise holes cut in them at the knees. His shirt, still showing razor-sharp creases where it has been carefully ironed, is open not one, but two buttons. Underneath he is wearing a gleaming white singlet.

I look at his clothing, puzzled. This isn't his style. Although I've seen him in everything from a toga to a WWII military uniform, it's always been neat. Tidy. Polished. Today he looks like –

– Like he's trying to be shabby and cool at the same time.

I think we all realise it around the same time. Excitement bubbles through the group, people looking from one person to another, making sure we're correct, making sure we all understand it. 'Oh my god,' Will whispers. 'He's eating here.'

One of the bolder, larger drones hovers close to the Resident, and the smart screens switch to its point of view. The footman looks annoyed, and takes a step forward, his own drone snakelike, ready to spring into action if required. The Resident makes a slight gesture with his hand, and the footman steps back. A voice, small and tinny, but immediately recognisable, emits from the drone. It echoes on the smart screen. 'Sir, good evening. This is July Augustine , and you're live on Omega News. Any comment on tonight's debate?'

In the small space of time it took for the question to be asked, the Resident has put on his best, smiling face, folded his hands one across the other, and straightened up. He is on show, and he knows it. 'Thank you, July,' he smiles. 'Of course it's up to the people of Newtopia to decide who they want to elect as Resident, but I know that what I propose is a strong, progressive Newtopia…'

A smaller drone, wasplike, darts in. 'Your reforms will mean that I won't be able to vote,' it spits.

'The rich already have everything they need. Why should they be the only ones who get a say?' It darts away before it, or its owner's voice, can be recognised. Another one takes its place. 'I hear rumours that invulnerability is ending. Do you want blood on your hands?'

The Resident doesn't move, doesn't even blink. I guess over the past few months he's become used to this. Instead, the footman steps forward. 'No more questions,' he says firmly. His drone reinforces what he's saying with a loud metallic hiss, rearing forward to show its fangs and flickering tongue.

The swarm of drones draws back, and they each buzz away in separate directions. I notice that the smart screens are once again showing the waterfalls and gold necklaces.

During the confusion I didn't notice it, but now I see movement at the Hobo Hangout doors. Two men dressed like garbage men have emerged, and started to push open the big doors. When they see the Resident, and the crowd of people around him, they leave the doors ajar, and rush over to him. The Resident, surrounded by a triangle made up of his footman and the two garbage men, is rushed inside the restaurant. His driver shakes the reins, and the carriage gently moves on down the street.

For a moment, I am worried that the doors will shut again, but a couple of seconds later, the garbage men reappear, and keep pushing the doors open. The rest of the crowd begins to move; some towards the door, some back to the street. A line forms, the two garbage men scanning peoples' drones for ID and taking payment before allowing them inside. Alix has warned us in advance that the restaurant only takes cash, no drone, so we have all come prepared with notes and coins. They feel odd in my pocket.

As the group heads inside, I'm the last one to start moving. As I do, one of the piles of rags near the dumpster moves – and I realise that it's a person, curled up under a pile of clothes and cardboard. His head lifts up. His eyes meet mine, and I see there's something dark oozing across his forehead. He reaches out a hand, and opens his mouth, and I wait to see what he's about to say.

Then Will calls my name.

The man's hand twitches, and he settles back down again, something heavy and sad in his eyes. Will glances down at the man at my feet. 'Great makeup job,' he says. 'Love the fake blood. This whole place reminds me of the time Dad took me to New York City.' I let him lead me across the street, to the restaurant, although I keep trying to look back over my shoulder at the man.

The two garbage men scan our drones. We pay, carefully counting out the unfamiliar notes and coins, and we are allowed inside. I stop in the doorway for a moment, looking around. The restaurant is a single, long, thin room. At the back is a counter and serving hatch, and beyond it I can see a kitchen. The kitchen looks like the newest thing in the restaurant; it's all chrome and shiny steel and gleaming white surfaces. The rest of the

inside… well, it's a mess. Newspapers are plastered crookedly over broken windows and cracks in the walls. The single table, running the length of the room, is old and battered. The long benches running either side of it are equally battered. And in the air, there's a sense of something old, and greasy, and not quite fresh.

'I heard they spent six months doing research to get the smell right,' Will says. 'And they brought in decorators from Galatea District. My chauffeur said he used to do some plastering in here on his days off.' I let him keep talking, and let him take me gently by the hand, and lead me to the table. A couple of the group have been saving a spot for us. We're nowhere near the Resident, although I notice that Alix has managed to position herself so she is almost directly opposite him.

As we take our seats, there's movement in the kitchen. Two waiters step forward, carrying a huge pot, which they set down on the counter. A third waiter follows behind them with a stack of bowls. She sets the bowls down next to the pot. A man dressed in elegant, old fashioned chef's whites, steps forward. 'Ladies and gentlemen,' he says, to gentle applause, 'Welcome to the Hobo Hangout. Please come forward for your entree, Yesterday's Soup.'

It takes a couple of minutes for everyone to push back the long benches, and shuffle out from behind the table. But eventually, we have formed into an orderly line, and the waiters begin to serve us, one at a time. As the Resident steps forward, the chef's eyes narrow, and his lips tighten. I don't hear what they say to each other, but while the Resident is smiling, the chef is not. Then the chef steps back, into the kitchen, and the Resident's smile falters for just one second. The waiter ladles out an extra large bowl of soup to the Resident. She's a little clumsy, or maybe she's just excited, but the soup sloshes around in the bowl, and splashes onto the Resident.

For a moment, there is almost silence. Everyone watches and waits, to see how the Resident will react. Even the chef looks nervous. Then the Resident smiles. He points down to the stain on his no-longer-pristine singlet, and it's obvious he's said something funny, because everyone around him laughs.

The line keeps moving.

Eventually my bowl is filled, and I'm sitting down next to Will. I take a slow, careful sniff. Smells good. There's no spoon, and when I look around at everyone else, I realise that we're supposed to drink it straight out of the bowl. So I bring it up to my mouth, and gently sip it. It tastes incredible, like nothing I've ever had before. I'm used to the most amazing, most complicated dishes – but this is so simple. So plain. Just peas and onion and cabbage, with some kind of shredded meat, and plenty of salt and pepper. There are dishes of bread rolls on the table. They're a little stale, but that just makes it better for dipping into the soup.

For a few minutes, the only sounds are gentle and not so gentle slurps. Then, as everyone finishes eating, the conversation starts. Will smiles at me. 'Wasn't that incredible? I wonder if their chef would give my chef the recipe.' Alix is already whispering to her drone. She's been blogging about our Friday meals, and I know she's reporting in on the entree.

'The next course, ladies and gentlemen, is served outside,' the chef announces. 'In small groups, if you please.' The first group gets up; the Resident, his footman, and a couple of our group. They are ushered towards the back of the restaurant, and past the kitchen. They are gone for a few minutes.

On their return, we smell them before we see them. It's a stale, overly sweet smell, with odd savoury elements mixed in. And when we do see them, it doesn't totally surprise me that they're all filthy. They're covered in garbage; eggshells, bits and pieces of vegetables, dark liquid. They are all carrying small, foil-wrapped trays. Well, the Resident – not even pretending to smile now – isn't carrying one, and his footman is carrying two. Seeing the Resident with strands of spaghetti dangling from his hair makes me smile.

They sit down, and open their trays. I crane my neck, curious. There are a few different bits and pieces in there. A small cardboard container with a drinking straw attached. An apple. A couple of slices of bread

containing some kind of meat and some vegetables. I peer at it for a minute, trying to figure out what this is. 'Sandwiches!' Will says, happily. 'God, I haven't had sandwiches since I was a little kid. How cool is this?'

I smile and nod at him.

The last time I had sandwiches was Mrs Gladstone's retirement party. I remember it for so many reasons. It was the first time I remember either of my parents setting foot into the kitchen. They both looked awkward, knowing they didn't belong there, but knowing it was important to make a good show. I think everyone, my parents included, were happy when they left.

It was the first time I knew I could be in the kitchen, without running the risk of me or the staff getting into trouble. While my parents were there, I pretended that I didn't know my way around, or which knife was best for cutting the bread, or where the good wine glasses were kept. But when they left, Ponting let me pour some of the drinks, and make some sandwiches. One of the maids let me roll out pastry for tomorrow's apple pies. And Mrs Gladstone was still in the middle of everything.

Eventually, things quietened down, until it was just me, Mrs Gladstone, and a couple of the other staff. Since I was the youngest, I was tidying up a little, just trying to make it easier for the staff when they started getting ready for the next day. Then Mrs Gladstone called me over. Ponting had produced a bottle of apple cider, and was pouring us all a glass, me included. 'To Mrs Gladstone!' he said, and we all clinked our glasses.

'I'll miss you,' I said to her. My voice was soft, but she heard me, and stretched out her hand to mine. 'Don't you forget me, Lena,' she said. 'Don't you forget everything I've taught you.' Then, slowly, she stood up, and gave me a hug.

Will and I are in the next group to go outside. He looks over at me, misreads the look on my face, and reaches out to squeeze my hand. 'This is the best night yet,' he says, as we head out to the back of the restaurant. 'I'm having fun, aren't you?'

I force a smile onto my face. 'Sure am.' But the truth is, I'm starting to feel really guilty. I've never visited Mrs Gladstone, I don't think I even have her address any more. And I haven't been downstairs as much as I used to. But mostly, it's because I feel like I finally understand what she was trying to teach me, only it's taken me a long time to understand.

A waiter ushers us past the kitchen, a tiny bathroom, and a couple of storage rooms, and outside. There's a long, thin backyard, whose primary distinguishing feature is a large metallic dumpster, sitting on its side. Garbage spills out of it, and onto the ground around it. The smell is a stronger, nastier version of the smell clinging to the Resident and the rest of his group. Here and there in the pile of garbage, I see little foil-wrapped trays. I sigh – there's so much food spilled on the ground. But everyone else seems excited.

'Ladies and gentlemen,' the waiter says, punctuating his speech with some elaborate hand flourishes. 'Your next course is Dumpster Diving!'

The group cheers. Will is first to approach the mound of garbage. He does so slowly, carefully. He's always so analytical, and I can tell he's figuring out how to maximise his chances of getting a tray while minimising the amount of mess he gets all over him. He circles the dumpster once, twice, then stops on the far side of the pile. Anchoring himself to the dumpster with one hand, he drops to one knee, stretches out with his other hand, and carefully extracts a tray. There is applause, and some good-natured booing, as he straightens himself up and makes a feeble attempt at brushing himself down. He rejoins the group, and holds the tray out to me. 'Here,' he says. 'You take this one.'

I smile, and give him a peck on the cheek, but push the tray back towards him. 'You keep it,' I say. I've finally realised that, maybe, there is something I can do.

I don't have Will's patience, or his brains, so instead of trying to figure out the easiest tray to go for, I just go for the closest. There are two trays right in front of me, so I just hold my breath, thank my lucky stars I'm wearing jeans and sneakers, and wade in.

Up close, the smell is awful. Even without breathing, I can sense how truly awful it is. A jumble of old, moulding food, with sweet smells and spices all mixed together. I grab both trays, and back out quickly,

before my stomach starts heaving. The waiter sees what I'm carrying. 'You're only supposed to take one tray,' he frowns. I rummage in the pocket of my – now ruined – jeans, and find a couple of folded notes. 'Is this enough to cover it?' I ask, offering them to the waiter. I didn't really check how much it was, but from the way his eyes light up, and he slips one of the notes into his sleeve, I figure it's probably okay.

When we get back inside, I drop my trays on the table, and scoop up a bread roll. 'I'll be back,' I whisper to Will. 'I just need some fresh air.' He nods at me, and I'm halfway to the front door before he realises which direction I'm going in. He looks up, quickly. 'Are you leaving?' he says. He doesn't want to say it too loudly, not in front of Alix and the Resident and the rest of the group. So it's pretty easy for me to pretend that I don't hear what he's saying, and even easier to keep walking.

I wasn't lying to him, not totally. I do need some fresh air, and as I step out onto the street I take a couple of deep, slow breaths. I feel my breathing start to settle, and I wipe my less-messy sleeve across my forehead to dry my face. My eyes are watering. I guess it's just the spices.

But there's something else I have to do.

The man is still lying in the gutter. His eyes are closed, but he's moved positions since we went inside, and I can see his chest rising and falling. So, at least I know he's alive. But I don't really know anything else. Especially what I should do, or what I want to do. So, while I am trying to decide, I sit down next to him. It's more comfortable than standing.

For a moment, we are both still. Then, I don't know, maybe he heard me, or maybe he woke up from his nap. But his eyes flicker open, and drift around for a little while before they settle on my face. I don't know if he recognises me, but I smile at him. 'Uh, hello,' I say. 'Are you hungry?' I hold out the bread roll to him. It helps fill the space between us. 'It's a little stale, and it isn't buttered, sorry.'

His eyes flicker from my face to the roll. He stretches out his hand. For a second, he stops, looks back at me, then down at the roll. I reach over a little, and push the bread roll into his hand. His hand is much colder than mine.

From the way he gulps down the roll, I'm guessing he is hungry. So, once he's finished, I hold out my empty hand to him, and say, 'Want to come inside with me? I have a spare meal. My name's Lena.'

'Zeb.' Zeb's voice is raspy. It takes him a little while to get up from the ground, but eventually he clasps his hand in mine, and I help him stand up. He is thinner than I thought. Most of his bulk seems to be extra layers of clothing. None of it really matches, but I guess it keeps him warm, which he's going to need soon. Lately Newtopia's been going through winter. I keep hoping it will snow. Will has told me about his skiing holidays, and they sound amazing.

As the Resident sees me come in with Zeb, his smile mostly stays on, although the corners of his mouth droop just a little. He murmurs something to his footman, and the two of them quickly stand up. My drone is sitting quietly on the table, recharging. I whisper to it. As everyone shuffles along to make room for me and Zeb, the drone snaps some quick pictures, making sure that every inch of the Resident is clearly in focus, especially the strands of spaghetti clinging to his shirt. The drone's eyes flash, just once. It looks like it's winking at me, and I know the photos are already being uploaded. I smile.

As everyone kept chattering, I started thinking. I knew Mrs Gladstone was out there, somewhere. And so the next morning, I started looking for her. I started by talking to our staff, because I figured some of them might still be in touch with her. I thought they could give me some clue where she was.

Most of them shrugged, although one of the younger maids asked, if I found her, could I please ask her to write down her recipe for scones. Apparently, even though they'd seen her make it so many times, no-one in the kitchen could get them to turn out exactly right. Then Ponting gave me an address. It was a boarding house, right on the outskirts of Newtopia, in the kind of back street my parents pretended didn't exist. When I went there, the landlady said she'd moved out a couple of months ago. But she'd left a forwarding address; care

of a woman in Calafia. Maybe a sister, maybe a cousin, the landlady thought. I was surprised. I didn't know Mrs Gladstone was even in touch with her family. She'd never talked to me about them.

So, I came here. It's the best lead I've got, although it's not really that much help. Just an address on an old piece of paper. I know it might take me a while to find her. Then again, eternity is a long time.

A long silence greets Lena's story.

It continues as the chlorohuman abruptly asks, – So what had been done to him? This Zeb? | Her-his tendrils quiver with unease, distorting her-his gestural language.

Lena shakes her head. 'That's… not really the point of the story. He'd been *hurt*. He never told me how.'

'Hurt?' The Denisovan's mouth makes a shape of distress. An upset murmur runs through the crowd, and Akroates remembers how the criminologist Scala's story was received last month. As every other storyteller this evening has been at pains to emphasise, such a thing should not be remotely possible. He wonders whether they have perhaps been protesting too much.

He glances at Arianrhod, but the Orpheid is temporarily rapt in a narrative-reception trance, stimulated by the odrorir her people habitually imbibe at storytelling ceremonies. He may have to ask her to go easier on that in future.

'I didn't mean to upset anyone,' the young heiress protests, her voice angry now. 'I'm telling you what happened.' While the audience could not – surely, still cannot – harm Lena, they could make her evening quite unpleasant, and that is not something Akroates will tolerate in his inn. Besides, her drone has risen from its place at her table and is hovering at her shoulder, ready to engage whatever technically harmless crowd-pacifying capabilities it may possess. This could get out of control quickly.

'It's a pack of lies!' someone shouts, and Akroates steps out from behind the bar, ready to exert his own calming measures.

Someone is ahead of him, however. 'Oh, honey,' says a smiling blonde sapiens woman, well turned out but at considerably less cost than Lena, as she takes the girl's arm. 'Never you mind them. You told your story, and that's all that matters right now. Whether it's true or not's no business of anyone else's.' The newcomer – whom Akroates had marked out as a 'maybe' for storytelling purposes, but of whom he would not have expected this – has a mature resurrection body, one which he imagines could still be highly attractive to somebody so inclined. A handbag traced with reddish metal and blue stone sits on her shoulder.

'Absolutely,' Akroates confirms, feeling suddenly clumsy in his gangly late-teen body. 'You've entertained us for a time, and that's all we ask here.' The older woman flashes him a dazzling smile, and Lena nods her thanks, her mouth set tightly.

'We thank you, storyteller,' Arianrhod agrees, alert again suddenly, and her sudden intervention shames – or perhaps just surprises – some of the patrons into applauding.

As the clapping subsides, a harsh voice says, 'That sounds like my cue.' The old man with the disfigured face is standing by the fire-pit, ready to speak his piece.

'This one's from a very old friend of mine…' he begins.

***

BORN AMONG BRIARS

Jay Eales

'This one's from a very old friend of mine, Jim Sheldrake.' The storyteller paused to let his name-drop take effect. 'You might have heard of him.' He smiled, as he pushed back an unruly dreadlock and cast a hooded glance at his audience, looking for recognition, but finding none. He pressed on, the gravel in his voice grown organically over years and lifetimes beside one fire or another.

The name he had chosen for himself was Story. It was not his birth name, or any of sundry identities he had worn, but it was the one he had borne the longest, both before and after his rebirth. In truth he had *always* been Story. Every wrinkle and blemish upon his skin told its own tale, so no wonder he had been rebirthed exactly as he went out. The diagonal tramlines across his face were just as much a part of him as the piercing blue eyes they accentuated, or the tattoos that faded and bled over his skin over the years. Whether by accident or design, he had grown to resemble his old mentor Sheldrake, with a wild mane of hair, formed into long knitted dreads on the sides and shorter spiked dreadlets on top. A close enough likeness to attract the attention of Harry Benson, one of the evening's earlier storytellers. Benson put bread – and occasionally pâté de foie gras – on his table finding doppelgangers, and he had already made a note of Story's famous lookalike for future reference, should the need arise. Not a big note, as Story's facial scars were off-character, and likely to be a deal-breaker, but you never knew.

If Story had come back as a young Adonis, he would have been bereft, as though half his bag of tricks had been stripped from him. The process had already taken more from him than he could bear, but it was what drove him on. His stage beckoned. In the flickering false light from the holographic hearth, Story's shadows danced, and he began:

'It's the words that make the worlds. Worlds made of words. And words will be free –'

The door to this particular world, The World Turned Upside-Down, was thrown wide, and in tumbled a ball of twitching energy, legs and arms, somehow held together by tweed suit and forward motion. 'Claudius Lapin, atcherservice, but call me Claude. Ever'body does!' as he would repeat more often than necessary. He spoke a curious form of Downhome Civil, and sometimes his sentences got away from themselves, as though he needed two words to everyone else's one.

'I aten't too late is I? Say it ain't so?' He consulted his pocket watch, shook it and replaced it in its pouch at his waist, shaking his head all the time and chuntering to himself furiously. 'Dat hill more deceptive than a Govesville Rattler. Down there at the bottom, it don't look so very far, but whew, getting from there ta here put the lie ta that! Think I done left half'a my breath in the street. Better leave that door ajar fer a spell ta let it ketchup.'

Story's brows furrowed, deepening the already extensive wrinkles thereon. He unconsciously formed his hands into fists, causing his body art to ripple across their backs. The mikedrone hovered hesitantly above his head, anticipating his next movement. Story adjusted his posture on the barstool, shoulders tensed from the interruption, and he opened his mouth to begin again:

'It's the words –'

'Aah!' Lapin gave a loud and theatrically appreciative double sniff, filling his nostrils with the aroma coming from the World's kitchen. 'Whatever you gots in that cooking pot, I wants a heap of it, just as soon as I finished with all the yakking. I got a mighty hunger building in my guts, and yarn-spinnin' only makes it holler all the louder!'

Lapin made a beeline for Story, and without warning, snatched up his hand and began to pump it enthusiastically, while Story attempted to extricate himself from the grip. All the time he was pumping,

Lapin's jaws were going twenty to the dozen. 'I see you was all ready to start your own tale. Well, I know you won't mind lettin' ol' Claude take yer turn, 'specially not if it gets you more time with a dish of that fine grub they got on the go back there. Oh, I do hope it's Stone Soup… Ah, my tastebuds are all standin' ta 'tention jus' thinking about it. But no, I won't keep you from that heavenly plate. I'll keep you seat toasty, and don't you be worrying no more about it. No, no. No need to thank me. I'd do the same for any fella.'

By now, Story had finally managed to work his way free from Lapin's surprisingly strong handshake, but by then, he had somehow been hustled up and away from his seat and several steps along the way to the kitchen. He caught the eye, singular, of the publican Akroates, who was cleaning a glass on auto-pilot, but the cyclops just gave him a noncommittal shrug and nodded towards Arianrhod, who was MCing the event. Story directed his appeal towards the Orpheid, but she was no more forthcoming. With one eye on the interrupted proceedings, and the other turned inward to who knew what matters concerned those of her kind, she raised a finger, halting Story in his tracks. 'We crave your indulgence, teller.' The tide of anger that had been building in him was becalmed by Arianrhod's distant gaze.

Lacking any further avenue of appeal, Story reluctantly acceded to his fate and stepped back from the fire pit. At a gesture from Arianrhod, the mikedrone switched its allegiance to the newcomer, one more betrayal to add to Story's score. He pulled up a stool, scraping the legs over the slate of the floor rather more noisily than he needed to, and waved over one of the bar staff for some of the stew he'd been hoodwinked into. Claude Lapin had to be a storyteller, he thought. He hadn't been hungry until Lapin had gone on about how tasty it would be. Maybe Akroates ought to put him on commission.

By the fire pit, Lapin gave Story's vacated stool a tentative bounce, but found it wanting. 'Heck, I think I'll jus' stand and grow some.'

'Well, lemme see now… We're going back a ways, and that ol' rascal Brer Rabbit is bored. He been scratting around the City, tryin' to scare up a good time or two, but ever 'body seem to have ants in their pants. And Brer Rabbit bouncing around in their faces just makes 'em even more sore.

'Specially them fellers what ain't ezzatly normal, with big ol aerials fer hands and teevees fer heads. They jus' about spittin' static at Brer Rabbit, when all he wants is a howdydo and a wetyerwhistle. Worst of the bunch though is that Brer Fox. Always bigging himself up, tellin' ever 'body they gots to pay him to know what going around. Jawing with that funny sounding Austramalaysian voice yak-yakking from his throatbox. Now him an' Brer Rabbit, they ain't never gonna be pals, nosir. But Brer Rabbit, he just too friendly for his own good sometimes. He keep on sticking his paw out to shake whenever he lay eyes on Brer Fox, but that ornery cuss just leave him hanging ever' time. Brer Rabbit just don't seem to take a hint. He takes to playing friendly li'l tricks on Brer Fox, tryin' to cheer him up or change his channel, but Brer Fox ain't got much use for his funny bone. Thinking on it, who knows if them teevee-heads even got one, truth be told. Prob'ly just a big mess o' gears an' clockworks stuffed in their skins. Anyways, no two ways about it, this just about boil Brer Fox's coconut. So one day, he aims to fix Brer Rabbit. Fix him real good. So, first of all, he gits himself a big ol' –'

'Heard it.' Story lifted his head up from his stew plate, playing Lapin at his own game.

'Buh…' Lapin flailed, unused to being distracted mid-flow, 'But he got him a big ol' –'

'Don't care. Heard that Tar Baby story more times than I've eaten hot dinners.' He dipped his bread in the soup bowl for added emphasis. 'What else have you got?'

'Oh, so you knows the one 'bout the tar bebby, huh? Don't make no nevermind. I gots a bagful of 'em.'

'That ol' Brer Fox was a rascal. He hate poor Brer Rabbit fit to bust. He fix ta kill him if'n he can. So, one day he git—'

'You're still telling the tar baby story.'

'Hmph!' Lapin stomped his foot to show his displeasure. 'Is you *suuuuuure* you all heard about that ol'

tar bebby?' He looked around the public house, trying to catch the eye of any of the audience. A sea of eyes looked away under his gaze, but then he hit upon someone who didn't react quickly enough, and locked on.

Unlike the regulars, for the most part local Calafia District literati, who knew better, it was a tourist from one of the outer regions. She was utterly unexceptional, until you noticed the implants grafted inelegantly to her skull and hands. Where the metal of the cameraware melded to skin, there were knotted scars from botched operations, and the aftermath of a terrifying encounter with the authorities, who had thought she was filming them, and had attempted to forcibly remove them as though they were simple headphones. The sensory feedback had left her blind for several weeks, and even more excruciating for her, it had wiped the memory discs of several months' recordings.

GelAreh Sharifi was one of the earliest wave of posthumans – the bodymod brigade – who had chosen to retain the archaic external camplants from her first life, instead of upgrading to Cityware after her rebirthday. It proved her undoing, because although GelAreh closed her kohl-rimmed eyes, her cams remained active, ever recording the world around her. Her obsession was to never miss an experience, or rely upon the vagaries of memory. The irony of the situation was that she spent so much time revisiting her befores that she let so many nows slip through her fingers.

'I… I don't remember the story,' GelAreh managed to blurt out before being cowed by all eyes suddenly being on her.

'See!' Lapin seized upon her as his champion. 'This here gal with the wires an' cam'ras stickin' outta her noggin ain't heard 'bout the bebby!' Calafian posthumans among the audience, with organic biochip tech many generations younger than GelAreh's own, shook their heads softly at her naïveté, being drawn into the dispute. They prided themselves on their lurker credentials. How outré it was to become part of the entertainment rather than remain a passive observer to the chain of events. Still, GelAreh's mistake added an extra frisson to proceedings for the others, in their dark nooks and crannies; seeing, and yet unseen.

Unfortunately, the attention proved too overpowering for GelAreh, whose sensory filters were as archaic as the rest of her rig. GelAreh had no way of fine-tuning their input, and overwhelmed by emotional blowback from all sides, she quickly made her copious excuses and fled from The World Turned Upside-Down. She escaped to the relative safety of her flotel, where she could at least review and dwell upon the minutiae of her evening feeds in isolation.

‘No more Brer Rabbit stories, please.’ Story asked, ‘Bad enough that they’re all over Fox Eternal twenty-four seven, without you trotting them out in here.’

‘Don’t be callin’ *them* stories. Ain’t nothing but Brer Fox mekking up lies for people what ought ta know better. Ever’body know Brer Rabbit allus end up on top. You knows it, an’ I deffernitly knows it. But that Fox, he got him some acter, one of Brer Rabbit’s many kids, prob’ly, an’ he turns ‘is head with talk a bright lights an’ swanky velocicoptas. All he gotta do is sell out his own daddy fer a stack a’ cash. Mek’s ’im play like he got rocks fer brains, an’ Fox got all the smarts. As if! You bets he got a big lafftrack going on, ’cause that bull puckey ain’t funny in the slightest.’ Lapin kneaded his hands together as though he had a scrawny neck between them.

‘I’ll tell you what I know.’ Story said coldly. ‘I know that those hoary old folk tales didn’t start out with a rabbit. They started with a spider.’

Lapin let out a great snort of derision at that. ‘Oh, so you one a them Anansi boys, is you? Well, lemme tell you this. Them stories may or mayn’t a happened to the Spider fella fust, but they still belong to Brer Rabbit. Possession being a hunnert percent a’ the law, Citizen Smarty.’

‘But that’s just what Fox is doing with the three-vee show!’ Story rolled his eyes heavens-ward in exasperation.

‘That a good point, now I comes ta think on it. Mebbe Old Man Anansi done saddled up with that ol Fox to fix them Brer Rabbit tales, an’ mek him a laffing stock.’ Lapin took to pacing, as he thought through the situation.

‘Look, are you going to tell a story or sit down so I can finally get to the one you interrupted?’

‘Oh, you heard enough about Brer Rabbit, has you? A different story, you say? That I can do, fer sure. I got a hunnert of ’em.’ Lapin rubbed his chin, deep in thought. ‘I cud yak ’bout how they fished Sister Moon right outta the pond? How’d that strike ya? Ah, but that rabbit be all over that ’un. Or how Brer Tarrypin won in a runnin’ race. Brer Rabbit don’ even come outta that so well.’ Now he was drumming his fingers on his cheek in the hope it would inspire him. ‘Now I gots it! I’ll tell ya how ta mek a dollar a day.’ Lapin looked satisfied with himself at last. ‘That ain’t got much Rabbit in it. Practic’ly home-ah-pathic.’

By this point, Story was on his feet, and squared up to Lapin. He placed his hand on Lapin’s arm, not belligerently, but purposefully. ‘My seat, I believe.’ His voice suggested that he would brook no further delaying tactics.

‘Waitaminnit!’ Lapin said, patting Story’s hand reassuringly, while somehow managing to leave him holding air instead of arm. ‘I got one ain’t been telt before, though I ’spec’ *you* got a word or two ta say about it.’ Lapin glared pointedly at Story. ‘You and me oughta be pals, what with our sim’lar upbringin’s. You’s up yerself if’n ya thinks ya better n’ me. You ain’t nothin’ but words on a page yerself. Poppy made ya a real boy, but you ain’t all that.’ Lapin adopted a new approach, and began to pace around the room, fixing each member of the audience in turn, dragging their attention along for the ride, much as he had talked Story into partaking of the stew.

Story slunk back to his seat, and adopted his eating stance, slumped over the bowl, with one arm draped defensively around it, and the other grasping his spoon, preparing each next mouthful before the last was swallowed. It was a habit he had never managed to break.

‘This’un, it begin like so many do, with a writer. He do this all the day long, jes’ sitting an’ smoking, typing away on an ol’ klikkity-klak typewriter. To pay some bills, so the Man don’t be throwing him and his fambly out into the street, he go down on his knees to the magazine editor, and he throw him a bone. Gives him the letters page to play with.

‘Now, this may shock ya, but all them correspondences ya reads in the magazines – well, they is all made up. You all ain’t got time to go writing to no magazine, right? Well neither does nobody else! So, the

old writer, he teks a big ol' puff of his cheroot, and he lets his fingers do the walking. If'n you clever enough, you can tell which ones come outta his noggin, cuz they all like: "Well, I surely do love that picture story by Mister J. Sheldrake, he am surely some kinda genius or su'tin'."'

Story had been almost mechanically shovelling stew into his mouth, as though he was worried someone might attempt to take it from him, but at the mention of Sheldrake, he looked up from his meal.

'So along come this little fart squeezed outta a thought bubble – call him "Douglas, age 8". Well, he only meant to be a walk-on part – come on, cut a little caper and hightail it back home. He got less sides than a piece o' paper. But that fine. He do his little dance an' shuffle off the stage. Sheldrake get his cheque, an' ever'body happy. But then, a few smokes later, and the writer need a character in a hurry. Mebbe he lazy – why think up a new character outta thin air, when you kin jus' pluck up one who ain't currently doing much? Or mebbe he figure it'd be right funny to bring back "Douglas, age 8", dust 'im off and give 'im a new pair of dancin' boots. Jus' a bit o' fun for him to know an' you to find out, if'n you payin' attention.

'Now, "Douglas, age 8" ain't eight no more. He entering his teenage years, an' he get hisself in an' outta trouble fifty times to Tuesday. And Mister Sheldrake, he getting uppity now. He ain't just a hack, he a genuine lit'ry sensation. So "Douglas, age 8" get a big makeover, to fit what folks say they wanna be readin'. Ev'rythin' gots to be dark an' spooky. We check back in on him, an' turns out he had a poor old upbringing, full a' whuppin's, and not too many hugs. His hide so tanned, you could make a saddle of it. Like his daddy Jim, he got a big ol' mouth on him. He hang around with a crowd a' wronguns. They tells him to knock that flatfoot's hat off, an' he don't think twice. Bop! Off it comes –'

Lapin was forced to take a breather, as Harry Benson chimed in from the cheap seats with a hearty

'Huzzah!' in support of the protagonist's behaviour relating to officers of the peace. When he was sure that no further outbursts were forthcoming, Lapin continued:

'– Off it comes, and 'fore he c'n turn round to brag on it, all he sees is a cloud a' dust from they's feet, and next up, his collar getting all felt up by the flatfoot. An' then he jest talk n' talk, spilling his guts all over the road, 'bout who telt him ta do it, and where they hangs they hats. Gets hi'self a rep-u- tashun, an' a new name. Now they starts to callin' him Canary. Cuz of how he tattles on ever'body.

'Now, I gots to think that Sheldrake, he don't like Canary all that much. He treat 'im pretty bad, all things be considered. He always getting' in scrapes an' sneakin' about and slung in an' outta baby-jail. But he always come back for more, an' each crazy scheme stupider than the last.'

Story pushed away his plate, the last of his stew cold, with specks of congealing fat floating on the surface. It no longer held any appeal for him.

'Sounds to me like this Canary got a rough hand of cards.'

'Oh, fer sure. The deck stacked agin him. But ya can't blame 'im. He only followin' the script he got.'

'How come you know so much about him, anyway? It's not like he's as famous as, say, Brer Rabbit.'

'That be true enough,' Lapin grinned, 'But then, who is?'

Story smiled in return, though his was cold and unwelcoming by comparison. 'Of course, a lot of that will be down to the Fox show.'

'What! Don't you be sayin' a thing like that, even in jest!'

'No joke, "Claude". I'd go so far as to say that without that show, practically none of these gentlefolk –' he swept an arm across to indicate the rapt audience around them, '– would have heard of him, or those folksy tales of his.'

'You is just rude! I ain't never bin so insulted.'

'That surprises me greatly. Maybe you should listen more and talk less?' Story threw back his head, causing his dreads to whip about animatedly as he did so.

Arianrhod stood. She did it silently, but nonetheless, all eyes fell upon her, to see what her intentions

were. The air felt suddenly chilly, with an accompanying drop in the pressure within the pub. The supernaturally inclined among them might have describe the cold spot as the hallmark of a haunting. The sceptics would have laid the blame at the feet of Lapin, who had left the pub door open and unattended. The mikedrone paused in the air between Lapin and Story, vibrating gently; awaiting Arianrhod's pleasure, as were they all.

‘Compair Lapin.’ She addressed him by a very old title, little used in the City after Resurrection Day, but one Lapin still answered to when called upon. ‘Will you resume your telling?’

‘Beggin’ yer pardon, yer majesty.’ He bowed to his hostess three times in quick succession, and scuttled back to his place before the fire pit. He made a gun with his thumb and forefinger and primed the mikedrone to recommence its business. The drone wobbled as though it felt it should avoid the imaginary mind-bullet. Lapin started to speak: ‘Now, where was I agin? Oh, less skip ta my fav’rit bit. Canary jus’ about twenny summers or more, and he walkin’ past a jewel’ry store. All the time, that shiny stuff just glinting away, like it winking at Canary. It say, “Come on in, Mister Canary. I wanna go home with ya.” And Canary, he stop blinking. He can’t take his eyes off the prize. He ain’t got no rhyme or reason, he so hypno-matised, so he go in that store, and he tell the store owner he aiming ta take those pretty things offa her hands.

‘And she all “Izzat so?” an’ give Canary such a swipe with her hand that he knocked clean into the next day.

‘So, he take off down the street, in case she following, meaning to lick his wounds. He starts to thinkin’, about how that jewel’ry store owner done him wrong, and how he gonna get even with her. He smarting and cursing right through the night into the next day, and then a little voice say to him “Well, why don’t you do summat about it? Do it right now.”

‘And he goes “Yessir! I should do that right now!” and puffed up full of hisself, he goes straight back to that jewel’ry store, and kicks the door open, starting on about how he gonna get satisfaction…

‘He start bellowing at that jewel’ry store owner to come out an’ face him, an’ she just keep her lips zipped behind the curtin at the back’a the shop. Big black ol’ curtin, it were. A shimmerin’ and a shinin’ like a patch’a spilt engine oil. The sort’a curtin you’d wanna be wipin’ yer hands down yer britches after pullin’ it aside, most likely. Again, ol’ Canary shout out, “You get yourself out here an’ takes your medicine! I ain’t goin’ nowheres till ya gimme what I’m due!” Canary about fizzing on the spot by now, lookin’ for summat ta break.

‘“You want it, you better put your hand through this curtain an’ help y’self,” she cry, “If’n ya dare.”

‘”If’n I dare? If’n I *dare?*” Canary ‘bout fit to burst by now. “Well, I *do* dare!” he say, an’ he lean over the counter, an’ shove his hand right through the curtain, grasping about for what he gonna get. And hoo boy, he get it all right! He goes to grab, but gets grabbed hisself. His arm get reeled in like a fishing line with a sucker on the end.’ Lapin was slowly making his way around the fire pit. He carefully avoided the edge, despite its holographic nature, lest he destroy the illusion, or because the effect was so realistic that he thought he might tumble into the flames. He had his audience hooked just as securely as Canary was in the story he was telling. He mimed Canary’s back-and-forth pulling of his stuck arm and threats of violence, adding little grunts of exertion in his dialogue for added impact.

‘“Hey!” he cry, “You better leggo, or I reckon as I’ll punch the lights outta you head, lady or not!” He pull back his other arm, winding up a fist, ready to let fly.

‘“Well, Mister, if you don’t like what you got, mebbe you best do just that,” the store owner says, an’ that just fire ‘im up some more.

‘“Bop!” go Canary’s free hand, an’ quick’s a flash, that get just as grabbed as the first. Canary hear bracelets ratchet round his wrists, an’ he left with his tail swingin’ in the breeze over the counter top, stuck fast. An’ that when the curtains part, an out come not jus’ the store owner, but the flatfoot who been here all the time takin’ the partick-lers ‘bout Canary from the day before. This flatfoot, she got a grin so big an’ wide, it must’a gone all the way round from one side of her head to the other twice over to fit it all on, as she give Canary that familiar ol’ feeling round the collar.

‘Hah! Make me roll my sides up thinking about it, even now!’

Story clenched his jaw, and attempted to keep his emotions corked. He was staring across, not at Lapin,

but at Arianrhod, who calmly met his gaze with her own. Unblinking, but not in a worrying way, she held him in stasis, waiting for the right moment. When it came, she let him off the leash with a single slow and very deliberate eye blink. Story got the impression that the story that the Orpheid was encouraging was neither the story which he had intended to tell, nor Lapin's preference, but one of her own choosing. He dismissed the notion.

Dragging his chair back from the trestle table, Story signalled for attention much like a theatrical throat-clearing. Without a word from Arianrhod, the mikedrone re-established its loyalty to Story, and hummed across the room to join him, though it was forced to make an impromptu course-correction back on itself when Story's pace had him covering the room quicker than anticipated.

Lapin stopped in mid-chuckle, the smile falling right off his face as Story loomed up over him.

'Hey now… Be reasonable, fella! I ain't said nothin' worth getting' up a head o' steam over. I jes' sayin' what I heard is all.'

Story's eyes bored down into Lapin's, his anger only increasing the height difference between the two men. 'You think this is easy for me?' he said eventually.

'Beg pardon?' Lapin said, affecting a puzzled expression.

Story shucked off his top, letting the tunic fall to the floor. Revealing the sleeveless vest beneath, he uncovered arms that were randomly decorated with strings of tightly packed handwriting and other tattoo-work. Lines of text criss-crossed each other with no apparent rhyme or reason. It was the work of a madman, not an artist. At the top of one arm was the oldest work of them all, a Tweety-Pie motif, long faded into blurry obscurity, as though the colours were being absorbed into him. 'It's been like this since my City awakening. Sheldrake no longer speaks through me – his stories no longer work themselves out across my flesh.'

'I see you still got them two shadders,' Lapin pointed out, 'though now I comes to look at 'em close, one of 'em all withered away like a bad ear o' corn. An' the other, well… it bigger that it got a right to be, seein' as how it ain't rightly your'n, izzit… But, oh how stretched out an' thin that shadder is. You wants to be patchin' them holes, sir! Or cuttin' them strings right quick – snip-snip!'

'You have no idea what you're suggesting.' Story said softly.

'Oh, I knows more'n ya think. I ain't jes this wicked handsome face ya lookin' 'pon.' Lapin formed his hands palm outwards, with thumbs touching to form a rudimentary frame around his cheeks and chin, voguing for all he was worth, with perhaps misplaced comedic intent. Story was not of a mind to play the straight man to a capering loon, and did his level best to ignore his antics. Lapin was equally committed to his cause, and he was unused to the abstract concept of being ignored. That was something that happened to other people.

'Gotta axe yourself, can a man with two shadders 'scape the one he borrowed? Not that you running – heck, you be running the wrong way. You runnin' straight at it! What kinda fool wanna do a thing like that?' Lapin shook his head violently, and pantomimed as though a cold chill had fallen across him.

'Do you know how a man gets two shadows?' Story asked.

'Well… I heard a thing or two.' Lapin stammered. 'Whispers, mostly. Prob'ly nothin' to tell, matterafact…' Lapin spoke as much to fill the silence as anything. Or to delay Story from commencing whatever was about to come out of his mouth next.

'I'll tell you.' Story said, snatching up a table decoration from a nearby trestle; a decorative candle. He put it down while he manhandled Lapin until he stood in front of the fire pit. When he picked it up again, he walked towards Lapin, and held the candle to the side of him. Unsure as to what he was about to do, Lapin took a step back, into the pit, causing the holographic projection to pixellate around him. Out of courtesy, he stepped forward again, and the illusion was restored. Story raised up the heavy candle-holder, and Lapin

put up an arm defensively, fearing even a harmless blow. But Story just pointed to the ground, directing Lapin's attention to the two shadows he now sported, albeit one far stronger than the other. 'Two light sources,' Story said.

Lapin thought it best not to check how many shadows Story was currently throwing.

'Only way I can think to get rid of an extra shadow.' Story licked his thumb and forefinger, and snuffed out the candle flame with a sizzle. 'Take away one of the lights.' Lapin opened his mouth to respond, but could only manage a gulp.

Arianrhod spoke then, for all to hear: 'We shall be adjourning the storytelling for a time. I suggest you refill your flagons, charge your energicells or do whatever you must in order to refresh and fortify yourselves for the next go-around.' She turned her attention towards Story and Lapin. 'Now, thank these fellows for their communal telling… *unorthodox* as it was.' She offered the storytellers a gentle curtsey of acknowledgement, and the patrons understood instinctively that any further part of this conversation was no longer for their ears. There was a smattering of confused applause, amid a rush to the bar and privies. Arianrhod ushered Story and Lapin to a reserved booth tucked away in the rear of The World Turned Upside-Down, where they would be assured a modicum of privacy.

Lapin called for two ales, since talking was always thirsty work. Prodding at Story's body art with a finger, Lapin ventured a comment: 'Them feller convicts you chained up with din't give you that Tweety-Pie on yer arm. It weren't on account a' all them times ya blabbed ta the guards, whatever you 'member. Nor them tramlines ya got 'cross ya face. You may reckon it were you bein' telt a lesson not ta tek another man's t'bacca, but you only done what you was made to. Them fellas no more in control a' theirselves than you was. Even less so, mebbe. They's a gun, but Sheldrake gave 'em the bullets. It all on him, if'n ya axe me…'

'You never did explain how you know so much about me.' Story said.

‘Oh,’ Lapin blustered, ‘you be surprised what ya pick up on the road, bouncin’ from burg ta burg.’ Then he seemed to realise that there was no further need for grandstanding. There was no longer a gallery to play to, and he dialled down his personality a few notches. ‘I ain’t gots ta compete all the time, I s’pose. Sit around enuff fires, an’ you hears all kinda yarns. Never know when ya might hear summat ta put in the Rabbit pot. Give it a stir and bring it out good as new. I heard about Jim Sheldrake round an’ about. He get mentioned.’

‘Really?’ There was a twinge of excited hope in Story’s voice.

‘Mostly by you, I’ll admit, but you ain’t the only ‘un brings ’im up.’

‘Anything that might help me to find him?’ Story was struggling to fan the embers of his hope, but given his previous lack of any solid leads, this was something to grasp at with both hands.

Lapin sighed deeply: ‘Close as you bin, do ya not find it queer that the writer ain’t looked ya up once you washed up in the City? Mebbe he dead. Izzat what ya reckon?’

‘He’s not dead.’ Story said sharply. ‘That much I do know. Nobody dies in the City, hadn’t you heard?’ Something in the way Story repeated the central tenet upon which the City of the Saved had been built, suggested that he was no longer entirely sure of the truth of the words, even as they left his mouth. ‘He may not be writing, but my body is still his canvas. The ink still moves. Not like it used to, and hardly ever when I’m watching. But while I’m sleeping… I sometimes sense it travelling – pins and needles scratching their way in fits and starts over my fleshscape. It… *comforts* me.’ Story gave himself a hug before continuing. ‘Come the morning, I scour the results for messages or meaning, but it’s nothing but hopeless doggerel, peppered with snatches of old works rising up from the depths.’

‘Sound ta me like he got writer’s block. That or just run right outta things ta say.’ Lapin cawed. ‘It do happen.’

‘Whatever. I’m tired of being the conduit for another man’s talent. I have tales of my own to tell.’

‘Well,’ Lapin rounded on Story, beady eye to eye, ‘if you gots your own stories scrabblin’ ta git out, why you only parrotin’ his ’uns?’

Story was quiet then, eyes unblinkingly on Lapin’s, trying to summon the right thing to say.

‘Because…’ He paused again before the words would come. ‘Because he’s the best. All my ideas, all the little shoots of imagination are crowded out and strangled by his weeds. His elegant, *perfect* weeds.’

‘Pshaw!’ Lapin exclaimed, and gave Story’s cheek a playful tug. ‘He ain’t all that…’ Before Story could dispute him, he continued, ‘Even if he were, he bin writin’ you long enough, I reckons.’

‘If I can find him, maybe he’ll take back this gift of his and let me go. Make me my own man at last.’ Story said it, but there was little conviction in his voice.

Lapin looked doubtfully at him. ‘Mebbe. But you bin schleppin’ from Bonehall to Snakefell, and not even a peep. Big as this City is, there only a few places ta lose yerself so’s nobody kin find ya if’n they really lookin’. Sounds like he properly minded not ta be found, if’n ya ask me. Mebbe if you wake ol’ Bribori Zadig, he got some kinda mystic insight ta set you straight. But sayin’ that, them folks taken to building they homes on top’a his hide prob’ly won’t thank you for bringing they shacks crashin’ down! It look like Sheldrake mostly forgot about you. Mebbe that for the best, an’ if’n you leave him be long enough, he forget all the way? You done all that he made ya to do. You bin his skellinton key to sneak his words out inta the world fer how many years? I’d say job done an’ done, but it ain’t fer me ta say…’

Story squirmed in his seat, not sure what to say. Lapin’s words were convincing, and nowhere near as irritating as he had previously seemed. But this was his life, not just a bowl of stew they were debating.

‘’Nother thing ta consider. If’n he do recall ya face, who know what shape he’ll carve outta ya this time? Mebbe he say howdydo an’ thankyekindly for services rendered. Or mebbe he be sore disappointed you ain’t done your own thing, and tek back whatever spark o’ creation he done put inta ya. Then nail you

back into that box you come out of, if'n he can.'

Story looked down at his arms, absent-mindedly tracing the tattoo scrawls upon them. Not really looking for meaning, just reading for reading's sake.

'*Scrape, hop and stumble. Scrape, hop and stumble…*'

'*He'd warned them all. They couldn't say that he hadn't. Stealing a glance down at his feet, he saw a reassuring darkness pooling from them.*'

'*Finally, the never-ending story ends!*'

'*And words will be free…*'

'You know, it occur ta me there's another way ta get rid of a shadder you don't need no more.'

'I'm all ears.' Story said. Lapin's hand shot up self-consciously to cup his own ear. He tried to mask it by making it into a gesture to smooth back his hair behind the offended ear.

'Less o' that, if'n ya please!' Lapin commented drily, before breaking into a toothy grin, his overbite showing. 'What you do, if'n you fixin' ta dump a pesky shadder, is this. Ya takes a look at the lights throwin' them shadders. And ya makes one of them lights so bright, the other don't hold a candle to it no more. If'n ya take my meanin'?'

Story considered his words fully before replying: 'I think I do.'

'There ain't but one door out of this World, but you's the only one can decide where it go.' Lapin gave a little drum on the table-top, and stood up, peering over at the door to the kitchen. He saw the

'Closed' sign, and his shoulders fell. 'Ah, dangit! No stew fer me, then. And here I is with a belly thinkin' my throat been cut.' He slapped his companion on the back and made for the exit. ''Nother time, Brother Story.'

'Another time, Brother Rabbit,' he replied.

Story picked up his satchel, left a few coins for the hospitality and opened the door. The light from without almost blinded him, but he made his choice. He went *Out*.

‘What in the world was *that* about?’ Akroates asks Arianrhod, baffled, as the tattooed oldster follows his garrulous rival out of the tavern. The orgy of drinks-buying which Arianrhod’s announcement of the interval elicited has begun to die down a little, and some of the audience are already waiting in their seats for the next turn. Akroates has poured her a dram of odrorir from the supply he keeps under the bar for his Orpheid customers.

‘Not all tales tell themselves silently, cyclops,’ Arianrhod answers, shaking her head slowly. Ice crystals tinkle in her hair. ‘Some breathe aloud in the world, or in the City.’

A severalth-generation City-born Orpheid, Arianrhod has absorbed much of Calafia’s cosmopolitan culture. From what Akroates recalls of her clan, who have lived at Yerba Buena Bay since Resurrection Day, she even has other human species in her recent lineage.

This is good because her Orpheid elders, the resurrectees especially, can be positively oblique.

‘You mean Remakes?’ Akroates asks, attempting to gloss her reply. ‘Those two didn’t look like Remakes.’

The man in the fedora, near them at the bar, gives him a sharp glance as he says it. His bloodhound face, a touch lopsided, is lugubrious in repose, but cracks now into a conspiratorial, malicious smile.

‘Stories may bring themselves to birth in many ways,’ Arianrhod agrees, or possibly disagrees.

The man tips his hat, drains his scotch and stands. His trenchcoat hangs slightly lower over his left shoulder.

Akroates looks across to where Lena Dmitri is now chatting with the kindly blonde woman. They have been joined by Hal Benson, who seems to be flirting rather diffidently with Lena – whether because of genuine attraction or because he hopes to persuade her to pick up his bar tab, Akroates tries not to speculate. ‘And what about her story?’ he asks. ‘Was she telling the truth?’ As soon as the words leave his mouth, he realises how futile a question this is to ask an Orpheid.

‘Which “truth”?’ Arianrhod asks rhetorically. ‘Fact and myth are orthogonal properties.’

‘It’s just –’ Akroates leans towards Arianrhod, so they can speak more quietly. The cloying honey musk of the odrorir fills his nostrils. He can see the coating of frost on her eyelashes, feel the heat draining from his own face.

He supposes that looking into his single eyeball – huge, from her point of view – must be no less unnerving for her. He whispers, ‘We’ve been getting more of *that kind* of story recently. I don’t just mean Matthew Scala – there’ve been others which only make sense if… well, you know. If something in the City’s *changing*.’

Arianrhod looks at him coolly – as if she has any other way to look. ‘Change is life, cyclops. Life, time and story – all are made of change.’

‘Enough of idling! Let the show go on!’ a voice cries, smooth yet commanding. It is the trenchcoated man, fedora in his hand now, revealing slicked-back hair. ‘My lady –’ he smiles ingratiatingly at Arianrhod ‘– I beg leave to tell my tale.’

Arianrhod nods. ‘It would be… apposite to recommence.’

The other patrons settle, as the mikedrone rises from its charge-port on the bar, and the man begins his soliloquy.

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THE MYSTERY OF THE ROSE

Richard Wright

I

Now immortality makes malcontents of men once neutered by the threat of death, and schemes erst fettered by a mortal dread now flower through the City of the Saved.

Released from Time's restrictive, crushing grip, with all infinity to realise its dreams, mankind's potential is exposed as nothing grander than it ever seemed. Eternity must rue the trick of fate that locked it to our tawdry monument. So my eye perceives, yet may I trust it? I am no more than I was writ to be, remaining a most dutiful cynic.

My father Shakespeare may shout proud to all; his vilest charmer undiminished stands.

You know me yet, who tell your stories here? I doubt it not. My hunch betrays me still, as do my withered arm and stumping foot. The patter of my speech confirms the truth – my author's revered voice is known to all.

A son of York, the plotting king, the fiend, Richard third, the deformed, dethroned, deceased. Yet never walked I through the world you knew. Pentameter crossed not that monarch's lips: his northern tongue could scarce concoct such verse. A Remake I, a story given flesh.

A fictive being pinned to humanity's understanding of itself so surely that I have earned a place at the end of Time. Unique as some may find my company, I am but one among Richards diverse, each culled from strutting, proud performances that sparked some fire in audiences' hearts. McKellen's face I wear upon my skull, and something of his heart beneath my breast. I thank him, for the choices that he made to separate his turn from all the rest bestowed a fortitude that shields me still. Insanity would steal me from myself were I to drop my guard for but a beat; I feel it caper, prancing all around and weaving traps about me in a net that threatens always to draw close. I'm cursed. My caste is doomed, as villains often are when plucked from fictions and made blood and bone. We are as we were written down to be.

Our DNA doth gaol us even here.

The die is cast, our scheming set to fail; a drama birthed me fully-formed a rogue with cruel ambitions far beyond my reach, as well I know. Does knowledge quench the thirst to play the arch-manipulator? Hardly.

My brethren, Richards wearing faces strange, cannot most often bear such certain failure. Distraught they strive to out-manoeuvre fate, and madness burns their intellects to ash.

I do not judge them, though I stand apart. Their urges fill my dreams to overflowing, and channels have I found to dissipate the crisis they would wreak upon my nerves. I cannot spin a sticky spider's web in which to bind weak-minded simpletons, yet nothing stops me seeking out intrigues laid down by fiends with stratagems their own. I have a reputation for my skills at picking loose conspiracy and fraud. A business have I made that satisfies the cravings that consume my waking hours: detective. I cannot play the villain; instead I prove the villain's tyranny, and sate desire through close proximity. My offices are kept in Chandlerville, a noir grotesquerie of clichés bold where tourists gorge on Hammett-esque excess. Bleak shadows slice apart the cold grey streets, the sharp black contrasts deathly sinister. They're painted on. That artifice tells all you need to understand the place.

I see the scorn writ large upon your face. Few clients come with serious intent.

That suits me well; I rarely waste my gifts on trivial domestic show-and-tells.

My anonymity is thus secure among the countless vying consultants each grasping for some mystery or case. Nor is there shortage of such work abroad, for all the Saved have loved ones they would find. Though none complain, the Resurrection Day gave scant consideration to their ties. Had Higher Powers organised the Rise, as dim fanatics still proclaim today, some evidence of planning might we see in reuniting friends and families, Rebirthing them together. I need not highlight this was not the case. You well know. Humanity was scattered to the wind, each soul adrift with stranger company than they had ever known. A brand new start, the slate wiped clean, it suited many well. Others hungered, hunger still, to reunite. Detectives thrive on such demand, and work knocks often on their stencilled office doors. I let them share that doleful drudgery among themselves. My hungers are scarce glutted by such menial affairs. Except for once.

The mystery – *my mystery* – the truth I choose to part upon your ears today. My office door is not adorned with text.

Those who scurry up the stairwell to my floor already know to whom they bring their woes. My secretary oft bemoans my sloth in advertising where I may be found. A posthuman, my employee was born across the stars, her world a distant jewel that to this day I struggle to conceive. Jezebel she calls herself, I doubt it is her true name born. Her folk lived as whores in life at least, genetically enhanced for giving pleasure on demand to all. She did not rue her days, or so she says, for since her youth she understood the role fair stamped across her genes. Escape came with Rebirth. Released from expectation's thrall, she saw the transformed shape her life might take if torn from its path and redirected.

Yet she does not know her disposition. A celibate, she wrestles with herself each day, in combat with her nurtured need to satisfy the hidden lusts of all who glance upon her svelte and limber form. Her pheromones do not assist; they draw such hungers forth that test the wills of saints. I tolerate the stirrings that arise, but never would I seek to consummate.

The mirror tells it plain enough. Should she herself prostate before my goblin form then pity would she have within her heart.

I have more pride. From this an understanding never spoken hangs between us outcasts.

Our natures are our constant warring foes, and misery in truth loves company.

Your patience does great credit to your names. I am verbose, I know, but heap my many failings on the quill that made me. Yet now, with introductions made we may begin.

II

It started with a woman – thus always seems to be the way of famous gumshoes and the thrilling yarns that best define us.

Two weeks had passed since last I set my wits 'gainst nemeses whose schemes had proved diverting. The time is key, a fortnight pacing through my rooms accompanied by demons old. They whispered stories to me in the dark of power and my rightful destiny, their rasping ever harder to resist. Poor Jezebel has come to recognise compulsion's grip upon my ravaged soul. *My moods* she calls them, letting me alone to beat them back as best I may. It's well.

I do not trust myself when I descend into the pit of my enforced design. Perturbed I was then when the telephone upon on my desk forgot raised shrill alarums. I snatched it up. 'Yes?'

'Client.' With one word she sank despair back to the deeps once more. I grunted, knew she would detain our guest for time enough that I might right myself.

I opened blinds, discovered greys and rain that could not damp my spirits newly raised, then wiped all traces of malaise away.

I took my seat just as the handle turned, and there she was. The woman at the door.

Such scenes as these repeat themselves, it seems, when clients come a-knocking at the doors of Citizens like Greaves and I, who take their woes and turn them to a tidy profit. Mine visited all dressed in mourning blacks which pricked my interest at once. Among a people freed from death such sights are rare. She stared at me with piercing eyes, as though her will alone might smite me from the world. A strong reaction, loathsome though I be; with some relief I noted Jez behind, discreetly lingering. Raw instinct shrieked to her that something was awry in this.

She hated me, this dour-garbed femme fatale.

'Our meeting cannot proffer fruit at such great distance. Please, be seated now, I beg.' She paused, and had she turned away I would in ignorance have lived most easily.

She crossed the room with malice in each step; such dainty heels did never bear a wrath malevolent as hers. I scoured my mind to place her, certain I had done her wrong. A casualty perhaps, some innocent once struck a glancing blow by my affairs. Her face was tragic porcelain. Though time eternal stretches, how could I forget a countenance so pallid and aggrieved? And yet I drew a blank. I knew her not, nor why she donned such grim visage. She sat.

'You butchered my children,' she said at last. Air drained out of the room. Dare I reply? Madwomen do not humour to the good. Misspoken words exacerbate the slights they deem have visited upon their lives.

'How disappointing. Dumbstruck? No clever words to parry? You killed my children, you merciless shit. Say something.' She waited.

'Madam, I – wait! – you cannot meant the princes?' The tower children, England's rightful heirs? Elizabeth Woodville, visitant at last.

'Elizabeth, you do me wrong and know it. While princelings I may count among the dead I clambered over questing for a throne, your babes were not among them. No Remake you, I have the right of it. Original Reborn you are, the Woodville mother plucked from hist–'

'I'm no simpleton, no matter what you think. You did not kill the children of my womb, but I have watched so many versions of you give the order 'gainst their dopplegangers of the stage and screen since.' Not crazy then, she knew a fiction from a fact. 'Delighted though I am that we concur, I struggle then to divinate what purpose brings you seeking counsel here?'

'I need to know if Richard killed my babes. I need to prove their killer.' I nodded.

The written histories dissent upon the subject of King Richard's guilt. It is a topic known to fire the academic's fey passions to a storm. How curious. I was seeing only then a truth that other storytellers here imparted.

While History once kept her secrets well, no longer. The City had deflowered that maiden long ago and turned her to a strumpet. Seekers of the whos and hows antiquity had from the record hid need only trace those witnesses Reborn into the Citizenry. I told her,

'If you desire to know the manner of their deaths, then why not seek them out and ask?' She stared at me though I were mad, and spat,

'Because they are not here! I looked, for years after the Resurrection Day. They don't exist here!' Tears shone in her eyes and spilled. That was impossible, and I was snared. Perchance she was mistaken yet, for in those early years the catalogue of man in infancy remained. As decades passed and people built their lives anew, their roots grew deep and traceable. Two children lost might yet be found were I to search anew. Still something tickled at my racing thoughts.

For years she searched, then stopped; my empathy sufficed to comprehend that a grieving mother's love had limits when a quest led her only to despair. What bade me pause lay not with the cessation of the hunt but the recommencement. 'With so long passed what gives you cause to open fresh these wounds?'

'How can you… don't you follow the newscasts?' I cocked my head, and let her lay it out.

'They're speaking of him for a Council seat.' She shook with rage upon the thought. 'Richard. The next free place may be his to refuse.

The media outlets will not let lie the remaining mystery of the rose.

They ask him daily, *Did you murder them?* A thousand times he could have put paid to my suffering, free of consequence, but refuses! Child-killers on the Council?

How can Citizens take such a grim chance?' Small wonder I was not aware; I do not follow politics.

Why tease myself? Yet now I saw her motives plain as day. Concern about a killer on the Council?

Far worse already walk the halls of power.

Nay, vengeance was her sport. He took from her those parts which most defined her: even now with aeons passed, she would reciprocate in kind. How best to strike? I know too well that plots and power fuel the former king above all else. 'I see,' I said, concealing my colossal glee, 'but why commission me? Others are there all too near who, glad to take a case of distinction, would delight in offering their services for free.'

'*You're* guilty. None contest your guilt, and though your crime took place in fictions for the stage, were you the man of history you would have slain them.' I made no denial. My memories may be a playwright's version of reality, but they are the truth of me. 'You have nothing to hide,' she said.

'Exposing him suits no concealed purpose or agenda for you. He can't dismiss you as a raving, grieving mother torn.'

She paused, composed her bearing. 'Will you take my case, child-murderer? Will you champion the truth for me?' Silence fell between us. My fingers drummed upon the wooden desk. I let her watch them, wondering how clear she saw the knife that killed her progeny in my grasp. Smiling, I released a sigh.

'You seek to set a fiend to catch a fiend.

A charming notion, that appeals to me. Yet what if innocence is all I see?'

I gave her credit for her thoughtful pause.

'I don't know. Perhaps I would discover a kind of peace that way as well. I want to find out. Please help me.' Spent, she slumped back. The man whose fate had my formation shaped.

I saw in him an adversary worth the taking up of arms, and steeled myself for revelations still to be unearthed.

III

Though readily I cite the ease with which the missing may be traced within the City, in truth I know not how it may be done. The principle is simple, yet the skills required elude me. Networks feature some, thus may I describe, beyond that nothing.

I could apply myself to garnering the knowledge that I lack, but ever find my eyelids drooping closed upon the thought; hence Jezebel. It's true that solace do I steal in shared discomfort with my ward, but that alone would merit no employ. Posthumans struggle less to comprehend technologies that sorcerous appear to creatures culled from simpler centuries, and learning that her skills extended past the confines of the boudoir pleased me well. To her the tasking, daunting though it was: find two brothers for me whose descriptions matched idealised memories dredged from a woman who had known them but a while. I knew how complex was the task as I explained it to her in the aftermath of Woodville's exit. 'Simplicity then,'

I jested, watching colour leave her face. With Jez assigned I idled not, and pounced upon the news feeds like a predator long starved and ravenous. I jested not, the stab and gore of politics calls forth my beast as blood in water summons sharks. I told myself I had no choice. Addicts often can be heard declaiming tricks of fate to be their downfall. Without context complete, my hopes of pleasing Citizen Woodville would be crushed. Might I truly not have found another way, an intellect so vast and proud as mine? How thoroughly did I embrace the task awaiting me?

I guzzled like an alcoholic freed from abstinence at last. In just three days my namesake's recent deeds were memorised.

I did concede then – Woodville spoke the truth.

A Councillor wields influence too great to trust democracy's mad whim to place it well. Instead there is selection. Who selects is murky, the criteria oblique. A month before, my namesake rose from relative obscurity to trip off tongues in Districts far and wide: a named contender for a seat, should one come free.

A manufactured muttering of course. I recognised at once the strategy employed, and thrilled that classics of its kind found favour still. Inelegantly staged it was, but self-fulfilling prophecies are treacherously hard to implement. An old campaigner such as I could not but note the details that played false in this attempt, though. In between the lines I saw the strangeness of the timing. Councillors make much of resignation when they choose to end their service, lauding what success they claim their tenure represents. For months before departure they will cry their names to all and sundry, locking legacies in place and seeding their next enterprise. A stony silence chilled from in their ranks; when asked for comment none would speculate on who among their number might vacate.

What value trolling for rewards no man could offer? Still another question did immersion in the story yield, that touched the heart of my commission recent won. King Richard could not resist extolling legends still associated with him.

Each one reminded listeners that here a man of true distinction they would find. Of princes murdered in a tower cell, a question that arose in interviews galore, he gave no comment, fuelling wild debate on repercussions that could come of putting infant-killers on a throne.

A simple yea or nay would clear the air, allow the matter to be closed and screw attention to his suitability to govern. Why say nought? Embarrassment for crimes committed in a life so long ago, when few attached great relevance to spent misdeeds? I could not credit it. When Jez returned she had what I desired.

Two brothers, yes, their census records locked behind security devices far beyond my crude appreciation's scope. Alone, that guaranteed my scrutiny.

IV

Thus to Bahut Nagar I bound myself, address in hand and questions rolling fast around my brain. The chain on which I sped was crammed with unwashed bodies heading home. In origin this District drew its roots from that sub-continent mysterious called India. To such as I it seemed as alien a world as any Jez had spoken of, where life was grinding hard. A mystery I find it that, with all of time's technology at hand, there still remains a place for poverty. At least the seeming of privation, if not quite its fact. I've journeyed to Bahut Nagar before, and found once most sufficient.

The chain into the platform warped and we disgorged unto our destinies, the rank flavour of the region pasting to my tongue. No place should reek so pungently that a visitor can recognise its taste before he sees a landmark he recalls. I hear that elsewhere in the City there abide false starscapes where adventurous explorers may fly vessels through the void. To touch a faux infinity must dwarf the mind, and that I gather is the point. A sterile wonder, most redundant when the chain can drop you in Bahut Nagar.

The platform sits above the sprawling slum and grants the visitor an endless view of single-storey dwellings built from cast- away detritus. Corrugated sheets of iron seem the fashionable choice for roofing. Looking out across the sea of rusting metal gives the visitor a new perspective on infinity that rightly humbles the most buoyant soul. Alas, the din of life from down below clawed up and spoiled the strange surreal calm. I descended to the ground by gleaming escalator, then stepped into the streets.

They grimed and twisted fecklessly between the dwellings and the shops that to my eye untrained seemed indistinguishable from each other. Somewhere in the hive I'd find a shack where once two princelings were Reborn, or so I now believed. The crime was none the worse for where it sent them. Knowing their first moments in the aftermath of death had passed in such distinct decrepitude gave pause. No killer would have

guessed Bahut Nagar awaited those he slaughtered, but retrospect had power. I will forgive assumptions that my stony heart was moved in thinking on their Resurrection plight.

You would be wrong, I was amused. Has Death ever been so great an equaliser?

The Reaper's hollow eyes found nothing to distinguish paupers from their princes grand. It pleased me well, knowing that the City equalled that dismissal of man's status when she went about the Resurrection.

A look along the street deterred what hopes I had of navigating to that shack unaided. I hailed an auto-rickshaw.

The cyborg driver knew no fear, and shoved his tiny crate through buzzing streets with mad abandon. Whether the activity I witnessed had a purpose was unclear, for much as people bullied though the throng, not one among them ever seemed to reach a destination that appeased their needs.

I wished a wash-house on them. None escaped the layering of dust that fastened hard against whatever surface it could find. My driver was the only one to have denied the ever-present filth, for his metal arm did gleam in clean defiant contrast to all else. Impressive too his welcome sense of clear direction. Steering so dense a warren must have taken vast recall, for when he stopped to indicate we had arrived, the hut was kin to all the others we had passed. 'You're positive?' He nodded, and I bade him wait while I approached. I did not reach the sheet that hung where most might put a door before it fell aside, revealing a small Indian female who started when she saw me. Her eyes immediately settled on my hunch, and cursèd did I know my luck to be.

A Hindu, so I thought, they like me not. Though I do rant of those who pity my deformities, the smug assumption that I bear the mark of crimes committed long ago in lives I don't recall rarely visits sweetness on my mood. I tried to smile. 'Madam,' I started, hoping she might yet recall two children resurrected there. Greetings were truncated by her shriek of rage and terror. Lashing out, she struck my face with vicious accuracy. Had the state of grace bestowed on those within the City failed, I know she would have marked my cheek with raking scratches furrowed deep. I jolted back through reflex, listening to accusations that confirmed my fears.

'*You give them back, sonbitch! The babies, give little babies back to me!*' Indians use 'baby' to describe all children who have yet to reach their teens. Little was there to be gained explaining how mistaken was she in assuming my identity.

The princes were not there, but had been once. I wondered just how long ago he took them. Her anger spent, she realised a fiend who kidnapped children stood outside her home. She turned and fled, to my relief. Before I could regain myself someone approached behind me. I was too late in piecing it together. The gleaming cyborg arm was clean because it had not lingered in Bahut Nagar for long. Someone had locked all knowledge of the princes safe within an electronic prison, a tower digital from which Jez fought to free it.

Had I stopped to wonder whether watchmen may have deciphered which among the files were stolen? Once that were known, his secrets would require protection. A bag appeared over my head to steal my vision as that metal arm snaked tight around my neck.

V

'All right, yer bastard. Siddown and shut up.'

The northern twang betrayed him just before he yanked the bag from off my head. I blinked. The ride had not been comfortable; mayhap my expectations of abduction are too high. Some flying craft, a blindfolded adventure through the sky. How long had passed en route I could not tell, some hours I thought.

I sat down as instructed, on a chair placed opposite the desk my captor was returning to the other side

of. Were my situation not so dubious, I might have laughed aloud to look on him.

His hunch was smaller than mine own, his limp was barely present. My smirk betrayed me.

'Something funny?' He did not look amused.

'McKellen was mis-cast. You are too young.'

'Oh, I dunno. Touch of class, McKellen.

I've been worse. You've got no clue how much I want to see you dead, do you?' I kept my mouth shut. It was not my day for sterling first impressions. 'Aye. Bloody state of grace. Can't do half the things to you I want to.

Go on then, get it done. Who hired you? That Woodville bitch? Nah, don't answer, got to be. She can't just bloody drop it, can she?' His eyes rolled, as though we shared a secret truth. I coughed discreetly, pulling focus hence.

'Unreasonable to a fault. Perspective might come easier should she discover if two princes might be found somewhere about the City. Perhaps you have an inkling you could share, one Richard to another?'

'Not bloody likely, pal.' He shook his head.

'So what makes you the special one? I saw them other Richards… shit…' He tapped his brow.

'Round the bloody twist, they are. Why not you?'

'A secret I do not intend to share.'

'Yer quick enough to stick your nose in my affairs when it bloody pleases you though.' I glanced around the darkened office suite that hosted our discussion. Richard was no pauper. 'It's a living, I suppose.'

'It's true, that. Don't take this pad for granted though. Bloody worked for this, I have. I got me noggin round the whole selection thing a decade back. It's taken that long just to get us this far.' His puzzling delight in sharing confidences gave me hope.

'Accept my warm congratulations, then.'

'It's going well, you have to give me that.

Take this place. Where I do me planning. Base of operations, sort of. Secret lair.'

He winked. I raised an eyebrow in despair.

'Aye right, I made that up. There's nowt secret about it. This is campaign central, this, where I keep me offices and that. Don't you want to know why I bloody hate you? I didn't drop it in there just for fun.'

'If telling me will give you pleasure, do.'

'You're brilliant.' Not quite what I expected. I know it to be true of course, and failed to hide my blush at hearing it aloud.

'Yeah, dead brilliant, you. I know, because you're what everybody thought I was when I turned up in this place. Scheming. Bit evil around the edges. Not trustworthy, like.'

'I tarnished you, alas. Apologies.

What argument you may have on this score might best be taken up with my playwright?'

'Nah. S'good. People like it. Bloody love it, tell you the truth. Took me a while to get up to scratch though. Wasn't much for plotting in my day. Stabbing stuff was more my speed. Liked stabbing stuff, I did.' His grin baited me.

'How fascinating that my query rests on hobbies that you hold so very dear.'

'Oh aye, the princes. Want to see them, then?' He stood and strode across the room. I trailed in Richard's wake, uncertain that my doom was not in progress. Sensing my discomfort, the king did hold before the door. 'Don't be a woman. Nowt's gonna happen. I want to show you something, that's all. We're on the top floor here – we'll get the lift down.' As we waited, nothing seemed to still his flapping tongue. 'You see real life? It were proper shit, right. Filthy, dangerous, shit. I weren't the best king ever, but I tried to make things bearable for people, yeah? And what did I get? Five centuries forgot beneath a bloody great car park, that's what. Not great for the self-esteem, is it?' The lift chimed.

'Infamy was yours when Shakespeare penned it.' The elevator opened, we climbed in.

'Aye, nice. Except that weren't me. It were you. I were proper bloody narked when I saw the record of my name had nowt to do with Richard, King of England. Suddenly they reckoned you a better me than me.'

'I see how irksome that could be for you.'

'Forget it. I agreed, decided that if you were what they wanted, I'd give it to them. I studied you. Learned from you. Got the hang of it. Now, it's second nature.'

I pondered hard as we descended. 'So you play a reputation never earned, to better catch the eye of those about?'

'You got it. Through there, the lobby. I've got a new exhibit to walk the journos past when they come asking questions. If you can't tell me what I've done when you see it, I've got you backwards. You're free to go after.'

I paused. 'Released? To speak of what I know?'

'Aye, if you like.' He led me from the lift. I saw his new exhibit, and the pieces fell together on the instant. A sign above them said '*The Princes?*'; down below two coffins black and infant-sized. A bold display that answered nought, but fuelled the fires of speculation. 'Yes. I see. Why would you wish to cease the chatter keeping you alive and on the tip of every tongue?

You cannot have the question answered yet.'

'Not 'til I'm on the bloody Council, aye.

It won't matter then. Them coffins are built special. You can't crack 'em, scan 'em, see what's in 'em. No one can.' Crossing his arms, he smiled. I paused, confused. Was he suggesting that the boxes were but shells that might contain… I felt a chill run through my veins. 'You stole the princes and condemned them to that hell?'

'Mebbes aye, mebbes no. Could be I gave 'em new identities and they're living far away. Bit risky though. They could be found. It could be I took the easy option and took them out of circulation, locked 'em in a magic box to scream and howl forever. What do you reckon, then? Just How big a bastard do you think I am?'

He winked at me, then sauntered to his lift. Alone I could not take my eyes away from those two coffins, and what they contained. I could relate to Woodville all I knew, but something deep inside me opened wide, a chasm of the id where I suppressed those urges that I feared. Delight soared out. The beauty of the scheme consumed me, yes – why not? The mastermind who built it knew to take his lessons only from the best.

The question posed by those two coffins would ensure that Richard's name would captivate the Citizenry and ensure that when a vacancy arose, however long that took, he would be poised. What was the rush? Time matters not to an immortal king.

You know of what befell King Richard's scheme, for Councillor Plantagenet remains a source of daily headlines in the news. And what of that fictive Richard with an actor's face? How fared he in denouement? I kept my silence. I let my beast wake.

It was too sweet a thing to witness all that I might be, distilled. I do not have the means to seal the pit in which my id once dwelled. I wander, scheming, seeking out an opportunity to loose wild schemes and show my quality. I balance on a knife edge even now, and telling you my tale gives no respite. I'd take it back, rewind the clock, if I but had the means.

Of course. Of course. I'd take it back. Of course.

* * *

6

The Remake's story has provoked a sensation in The World Turned Upside-Down. Cllr Plantagenet has a knack for courting popularity which is rare in politicians, and there are those in the audience who are dismayed by this ersatz Richard's slander against him. The Remake is a skilled orator, however, and as persuasive and charismatic as BardCorp's chief asset penned his template to be: as many of the audience are scandalised by what he has revealed.

From the expression on Richard's face as he saunters back to his bar stool, this was more or less the response he was hoping for. Arianrhod, who cares little about politics and may in fact be constitutionally incapable of noticing it, appears serenely oblivious, but Akroates is concerned. This is the sort of thing that can seriously damage the mood in the venue, and unhappy patrons… well, drink more, actually, so conceivably his concerns are misplaced.

Once again, it is the woman with the handbag who retrieves the situation, by stepping up to the fire-pit and giving the mikedrone the benefit of her brilliant smile. Her brown eyes are ringed with mascara, her blonde hair perfectly arranged – though its style, like her heels and her tight dress, might be more advisable on a woman of a younger ostensible age. There is no denying the charms, though – the dress spells them out quite emphatically – and every person in the bar whose inclinations lie in the appropriate direction is visibly inclining.

Swinging from her shoulder, her bag glitters distractingly.

The woman introduces herself as Isabelle. Setting her sunshiny countenance next to Arianrhod's icy visage makes them look like drawings of the seasons on a medieval map.

She launches into her tale, and as before Akroates listens while he busies himself with his tasks – mopping up spills, washing glasses, emptying slops, checking his most popular wares are in good supply. As Isabelle speaks, though, he becomes distracted, placing a half-dried glass on the bar, letting his bar towel slip from his hands.

The story she is telling is familiar.

Not for one of the obvious reasons, either. It is not one of the universals, an archetypal legend or fairytale repeating itself across many cultures. Nor is it one of those banal life-experiences which half of humanity experiences, yet still feels the urge to tell the other half about.

No, this is a specific tale which Akroates has heard told before, albeit from a different point of view, at one of these very open-mike nights. As Isabelle's retelling progresses, he realises to his creeping dismay that these are the events which Roger the brain's colleague, Matthew Scala, recounted just the previous month. The story which caused all the unpleasantness.

So vivid is the memory that, even while Isabelle is still speaking, Akroates finds himself recalling lengthy portions of Scala's narrative. It is as if the criminologist were in the room with Isabelle, speaking with her in counterpoint, recreating between them the horrific – and surely quite impossible – crime which according to them both took place quite recently, right here in Calafia.

***

THE ISIS METHOD

Kelly Hale

Matthew

I walk into a bar carrying all of creation enthroned in a hollow. A tomb already raided and looted of treasure. I'm taking it out for sleazy one-night stand.

Isabelle

'So, what's your passion? What do you totally love to do?' asks Gemini.

I call him Gemini because of the hair. Part of it is gathered onto the top of his head in fat-rat tubes of a dirty straw colour. The underneath and sides are shaved and dark brown. He's got Gemini written plain as day in the dreads on his head and the clean-cut nape of his neck. He's dabbled in veganism, but (judging from the Nachos Grande platter in front of him) feels no moral obligation to avoid strange meat. A deep thinker too. Mostly about pot I imagine.

'I'm a taxidermist,' I tell him.

He looks worried for a second, like it's something to do with taxes, and leans his topknot-heavy head in his hand, thinking, thinking. 'Is that where you, like, stuff dead animals and pose 'em? Give

'em glass eyes and shit?'

'Exactly like.'

He grins. 'Cool.'

Not shocked then. I've picked the right profession.

'What kind of animals do you, like, you know – taxidermy?'

'Oh, all kinds. Wombats, and honey badgers, and uh, cougars –'

'No shit? Wow.'

'They're usually commissioned pieces, though. My bread and butter work is specialty hide tanning. I sell leather to Spartacus over on Gula Avenue.' Spartacus is a retro S&M toy shop run by one of the Spartacuses.

He gets nervous. 'I'm not into that.'

'Oh, me neither. It's a good market though. They sure go through the leather. But let's talk about you, darlin'.' So we do. Talk about him. He's twenty-five-stop and likes where he's at, pulling shots for that place round the corner.

Barista. Skater. Gemini. Crazy hair. Also he's a morning person. What he loves most, he tells me (amber eyes all shiny and gazing into the imaginary distance) is bombing down Bluebird Canyon Road on his long-board. Grateful and thankful and thrilled that he'll never have to stop doing the crazy scary thing he loves.

Adorable.

I tell him about when I was a child, sledding down Muskrat Hill over and over again; the butterfly float of my stomach as I bounced over the bumps, the rush of air and the snow like tiny little knives cutting into my chapped cheeks. That's the kind of sensation a person should never have to forego. Gemini agrees.

After we've done the sex I put him in my bag. He didn't look real close at the bag when we were drinking. They usually don't. I swear none of y'all can appreciate the beauty of a really good handbag.

Big sigh.

Gemini was a doll, but not much of a challenge really. I mean, well, look at me. I've obviously got the goods. And we 'older women' have that reputation, you know? Insatiable? Some young men think they're really going to like the whole insatiable business. But even if I can come at the drop of a hat, I can also come a bunch of times *after* the hat drops and they don't realize the terrible burden that can be. All night long is a very long time. Not for the faint-hearted. Plus, too many orgasms and it's just too close to pain. And boredom. And the pain of boredom. Anyway, I don't need them for the orgasms. I can get those all by myself.

I've got renewed purpose these days. A mission, you might say. And that mission is to build the perfect man – to *gestate*, if you will, an extraordinary and unequalled specimen. Only I haven't quite figured on what the finished product will be. *How* he should be. I know he will be a strong man, physically strong and strong in character. I imagine he'll love extreme skateboarding. And words. Words like 'precipice' and 'serendipity' and 'charisma.'

At Berbatti's open mike poetry nights I play literary groupie, sitting way in the back of the house, wearing thick-framed glasses and my hair up so I can do the sexy librarian reveal when the time is right. I'm following this writer who reads from his novel-in-progress every week. He's stuck in one of the skinny jeans eras, like all those guys from my high school who twenty years later were still wearing the same style even though their guts hung over the waistbands. His gut doesn't hang over but it's the same principle. He's taken Tom Spanbauer's workshop like eighty times or something. Won't use adverbs. At all. I mean, really, what the heck kind of poetry is that? So I smile cheekily. Nod graciously. Agree wholeheartedly. Then I take him home and *love* him voraciously.

Despite the overcompensating use of adjectives, he had some good stuff, my writer. Not so much *what* he wrote, but how he delivered it. Inspiring, thrilling, you hardly noticed it didn't make a lick of sense. Sadly, he thought he was the next Nabokov. Oh my god, and Nabokov was right there too, at Spanbauer's table.

Gotta tell you, I really *really* liked Nabokov. Would have loved to put a little of *that* in my bag. But he was with his new wife. They seemed really in love. It was sweet.

I can't even remember what it feels like to be in love. *In love*. Good lord, that's just biology yapping at you, making you to want to have babies. And maybe I don't have that baby-making urge anymore, which is why I can't recollect the feeling of being in love – which, you know, fine by me, I've had nine kids with three different husbands so I'm totally ready to let go of that. But sometimes, you know, something will set off a memory, like a few notes of a song or the smell of a raggedy old quilt you've pulled out of the dryer, and suddenly this feeling rushes to the surface of your skin and out the top of your head and it feels kind of like an anxiety attack, right? But you also have this powerful urge to grab hold of someone and hug that someone tight and never *ever* let them go again. I still get that feeling about my kids. I mean, I can just hear their voices inside my head, visualize their little faces, and that thing, that *feeling* fills me to bursting. Don't know that I ever loved a man with such abiding fierceness.

Hmm. Yeah. Well. Anyhoo…

Had the pleasure of playing the younger woman recently. Gentleman in question used to prefer older women, but apparently women his age got too old for him. Or too wise I suspect. He was spry though, oh my lord, yes. Had pickup lines like you would not believe. Also had himself a pickup truck modelled after the old Classic Ford F-100. He loved that truck and pretty sure it loved him right back. Even had a bumper sticker 'I'd rather be fishing' and just above that was a Jesus fish. Any of y'all remember the kind? Fish shape with the Greek IXOYE inside?

I really like the idea of fishing for Jesus, of maybe catching Jesus with a black nymph or an orange waggler.

'So, what's a good Christian fella doing in a bar like this?' I ask him.

He winks at me. 'Fishin', o' course.'

'Oh yeah? What kind of bait you using?'

'Jim Beam.' He tosses back the shot then leans in close, gray stubble on a strong jaw, sour breath soft in my ear. 'And the layin' on of hands, little lady.'

Well, this fish was definitely biting, let me tell you.

Later, when his hands are navigating the tributaries of my stretch marks, I decide I need those hands. My perfect man will have his hands.

Yep, like I said, I'm a gal with a mission. No crying over lost causes, not this time. I've got my perfect-man project, which is mostly going great, and when I have that all done, well, I'll likely feel something completely fresh, some kind of love that's never been felt before and I won't need to try to remember because I'll be making brand new memories, right?

Anyway, I been so busy decorating my new place I've got no time to worry about what it all means. In fact, that's how I found my handbag. I was looking for tea towels and trivets at Resurrection Antiques up the road and there it was, a flash of copper and lapis lazuli calling out to me from under a pile of bedazzled dog coats – *Hey girl, come on over here, you won't regret it*. And believe me I do not, not a single regret despite everything.

The shop owner, Tapi, he's a hoot. Called it an Isis Womb. But I'd totally love it even if it didn't have the extra pocket dimension.

Didn't I mention about the pocket? Huh. Yeah, well, my friend Niko was *very* interested in *that* I can tell you.

I'm not sure I should tell you though. Oh, what the hell.

Okay, so I'm in this trashy little hotel bar near the Convention Centre – yes, another bar, so what? All kinds of things going on at the Convention Centre that weekend. Epiceracon, and a Metamorphies reunion. I believe that was the same weekend the Classic Cars and Spacecrafts show got moved to the Convention Centre from RealSpace because of a protest. Plus, Universal Royalty was sponsoring the Little Miss Glamour and Glitz All-City Beauty Pageant – *Diamond Crown Division!*

Might not guess it looking at me now, but I took Ultimate Grand Supreme when I was only five years old. The crown was *this high* off my little head! My daddy was fit to burst. Couldn't ever get any of my girls interested in pageants. Not much call for me to sit in on one, was there? I was there attending the Crafty Wonderland Bazaar. You ever been to a Crafty Wonderland? It's so much fun. If you like crafting.

Anyway, what with all the various goings-on at the Convention Centre there must have been close to a million people wandering about. You'd've thought this little hotel bar would get some spill-over, but no, that's how trashy it was. Just the bartender, a chubby bronycorn at a table nursing a drink, and this handsome man sitting at the bar.

And oh, he is lovely, with long bony fingers, and big feet in leather high-tops. He's got a really nice suede jacket draped over the bar stool on the other side of him, and he's wearing mustard-coloured jeans and a long sleeved t-shirt with the image of a giant electrified eyeball on it. My feet are beat and that's as good excuse as any to sidle on up, set myself down and order me a lemon drop martini, which the bartender doesn't know how to make so I have a vodka tonic with lime instead.

I say 'handsome man' and he is that, dark hair falling thick across his brow, sharp cheekbones and lips just right. All pale of flesh and tall and lanky with that habitually dreamy-slash-sensitive faraway look like he's so in his head he forgets to eat all the time. I just want to take him home and stuff him full of mashed potatoes and gravy until he's comatose on my sofa.

He shoots a gaze my direction with eyes like little lightning bolts. Zing.

Honest to god, I'm not sure what to make of this one.

There's a bowl of pretzels and a glass of whiskey in front of him, and I see he's been idly pushing something around on the bar top – in and around through all the condensation. It looks a bit like a fuzzy caterpillar except too flat, and then I realize, oh my gosh, it's a fake moustache! I ask him why he's playing with a fake moustache and he says 'Because I shaved mine off ages ago,' and I laugh a little and put my hand over his and say, 'Oh honey, that sounds like a sad, sad story you're just dying to tell,' and I buy him another drink.

His name, he tells me, is Nikola Tesla, and yeah, I see some of you have heard the name before, but I hadn't, alright? Oh, maybe it rang an itty bitty bell in the back of my brain, something about electric cars, but honestly, I didn't really connect this word to an actual person. My lack of recognition disappointed him, but only for a second, and then he's real gracious about it because he doesn't want to embarrass me. It's clear he was raised to be a gentleman.

Turns out Citizen Tesla is the main attraction at one of the conventions going on and he's currently dodging his handlers. Apparently the convention organizers suggested to Citizen Tesla that if he would not wear the traditional Tesla costume (whatever that was) he must *at least* wear the fake moustache during the Q&A. They made it a requirement for receiving the agreed-upon fee.

'No one would dare insist that Dr Hawking stay in the chair and only communicate via a speech generator. And yet this –' he waves the fake moustache in the air front of him, '– *this* is what they expect of me. This is precisely why I have not responded to such invitations in all these years. I am not averse to putting on a show, but I cannot tell you how many times I've been invited to dine only so that my hosts can watch me calculate the cubic contents of my goulash. OCD does not make one mad, Citizen Gebhart. And I don't even suffer from it anymore!' He pounds his fist on the bar for emphasis and I jump – for which he is immediately apologetic.

As I've spilled a little of my drink, he kindly mops it off my chest with a paper napkin.

'I don't know how they will be able to distinguish the *real* me from all those thousands of persons dressed as me,' he says.

'Oh, but honey,' I offer, 'imitation, the *sincerest* form of flattery.'

'Perhaps. But it has nothing to do with my work. Or *me*. This *is* the real me. *I* am Nikola Tesla.' He swivels on the bar stool to face me, taking my hand between both of his. 'My inventions changed the world, Citizen Gebhart, guided humanity into the future and ultimately to this, this… miracle, this triumph of technology and spirit. I dare say the City itself would not exist were it not for my inventions.'

Well, yes, if he says so, but we happen to be in a dive bar in a cheap hotel. I think my expression must have said as much because then, to justify his bold assertion, he proceeds to name his inventions. All of them. It's a long list. I let my mind meander a bit, just watching his mouth form words like 'polyphase induction' and 'resonating frequencies' and 'earth heat' until I have to fan myself with the drinks coaster –

'Don't you agree, Citizen Gebhart?'

Sure, yes, of course, whatever you say Mr Pouty Lips Tesla. 'Please, call me Bella.'

He blushes, looks down, away, then back to me again.

'*Bella*. I do apologize. You've been more than accommodating listening to me moan on and on like a petulant child. Please understand that I am not ungrateful for the opportunity to present my work to new audiences. I have ideas, so many ideas, crowding my mind, clamouring for attention. I still have the discipline and focus and a great passion for my work. But I fear the people, the *audience*, will always insist on this.' He presses the moustache above his lip with two fingers. It doesn't stick and he lets it fall to the bar top like a dead moth. In the mirror behind the bar we catch each other's gazes.

My hair looks especially good. We both look sad though.

'Well,' he says, with a sigh, 'nothing is how I thought it would be I suppose.'

Turns out what he really means is that nothing (meaning: everything) is *exactly* how he thought it would be, and he's so terribly disappointed. I don't get that until much later, after he's, um, in the bag, so to speak.

Look, we didn't even *have* sex. I mean goodness. We were just… commiserating on the nature of disappointment.

You know what really sucks? About being the one who gets left rather than the one who does the leaving? It always happens when you think everything is fine. Like, you're going along and life is great, peachy even, and you're busy making slip covers for the sofa and hanging new drapes – and bam! Come to find out you're the only one who's happy. And one night, there you are, drifting off to sleep, all cosy and warm curled up next to your hubby, planning the trips you'll take together now that the kids are grown, when all the sudden he says, 'We need to talk.' And you *know* what that means because you've been down this road before. And you can't believe you didn't see it coming, but, once again, you didn't. So you gotta wonder, is it you? Every

damned time? Is it something about you? Did you become too complacent again, too content? Were you just too… happy? Is that why people you love leave? Because you're too damned happy?

Matthew

Before the City, the last time I was in a bar I was also looking for a killer. And I sure as hell found her, didn't I? My sweet Georgia peach. The very suspect I'd been chasing down for three long years. I could not believe my luck. Which is funny ironic now that I'm telling it.

She smiles at me, thanks me for the drink. We proceed to flirt back and forth, and I'd like to think we both know the score, what's really going down over pricey mojitos and very dirty martinis.

'Cause we're both savvy, clever people, we've danced this samba macabre before, and we're too smart for our good, and well aware of the game we're playing, of the next move, of the cat and the mouse nature of our intercourse and of just who is who in this scenario. But at some point in the conversation (and in the many that followed after this opening serve) we seem to forget we're playing. Or maybe I'm the only one who forgets. Probably, because I end up dead.

That's right. I used the D word.

I don't get why so many of us murder victims are still reluctant to talk about how we met our ugly, violent, unfortunate demises.

Me, I wanted to talk about it right out of the gate – maybe because I felt like such a chump bastard. Betrayed and made a fool of and killed dead with the heart cut out of me and how embarrassing that was, me being a cop, and I'm so fucking angry besides. I wanted to find her and get up in her face and ask her why why why me, when I loved her so much? But I was afraid of the answer. Or knew the answer and didn't want it affirmed.

This was years before anyone started specializing in treating post-traumatic death disorders. *Matt, Matt,* my friends used to say to me, *you're here, man! Nothing can hurt you like that again. Why bring all that shit up?*

Why? Because, well, 'all that' informs all… *this*. And love can always hurt like that. Even here. Love can rip the heart right out of you. Just not literally, we assume.

There's this guy in my support group who actually ran into the guy who killed him in a bar fight, ran into the fucker in a bodega not two streets from his home. Both of 'em standing there waiting to be rung up for, you know, beverages and sundries and what not. And the killer guy pretends to do this double take, right? 'Oh, hey, aren't you the guy I stabbed? Yeah, wow, sorry about that. My bad. Tell you what. Let me get that yogurt for you.'

True story.

Eventually you just have to let it go.

But the thing is, I used to be a *cop*. A police detective. I worked homicide and it was hard to let it go in that line of work. Because justice was a joke. Still is. There's no balance. The scales don't ever even out. A feather, a soul, a heart – how do you weigh those against the loss of a child? And since everybody was somebody's baby once, well, there is no justice, that's what you soon found out. Most you could do back then was to solve the puzzle of how and when and who, and, if you handled things right, you could make sure some murdering bastard suffered for their sins.

I teach it now. As history. Bleak fairytales of criminal justice in the sunny lecture halls of Calafia College.

So imagine my surprise at how quickly the sharp-edged reality of it all came back. When I see that guy's body floating in the water, bumping up against the pilings at the pier do I boggle at the incongruous

impossible evidence before me? I do not. My brain gets into gear, running through all the possibilities of how our man came to be floating here, the tools that might have been used to remove his hands, and where he might have been done in. Was the body dumped here after they (*she*, whoever) did him in, or was it dumped further down near the college maybe, or farther out in the bay before ending up here? There's not a lot of decay for a body that's been in the water for any length of time. I'm wondering if time of death can be determined from the lack of decay or if that lack is due to environmental factors, the nature of the City itself. What kind of functioning forensics kits can we dig up? Who was this poor bastard?

I got two City-born kids with me on this field trip. Glossolalia Dean and DaFwon Herbert – both out of the anthropology department. They're studying such bullshit as Criminal Ludology and Forensic Sherlockology. They cannot fathom what they're seeing. They can't come to grips with this bloated body missing its hands. Is it real? Is it really real?

Yeah, children. It's really real.

The eerie similarity of the missing hands means more bodies out there somewhere, bodies with other things missing. If not already, then soon. It's her MO. I've got a gut feeling, the kind of gut feeling that hasn't been roiling around in my gut for nearly three hundred years.

Isabelle

I keep running into him at all the usual places. My places, you know? Berbatti's and Surf City Tavern and Ojimaya and Black Penny's and the Pink Feather Lounge. Not really my type. Or not right for the project anyway. But we keep running into each other. And after a while we start running into each other on purpose.

'Where's that skater kid used to work here?' he asks me.

Gemini. I pretend to look around, shrug, shake my head.

'Too bad. Kid made a mean macchiato.' He winks and smiles. It's a slow smile like it's not sure it's welcome on his face anymore. He's got blue eyes and brown skin the colour of burnt sugar. I get this powerful urge to make a burnt sugar cake. Or pralines!

He cocks his head, trying to suss me out.

But I'm all sunshine that day, wearing a new sundress in fact, and big brimmed hat. I stretch my pedicured toes (in strappy sandals) in the direction of my bag beneath the table. Feel it pulsing against my foot like a living thing. I give it a little nudge to keep it in line.

'So?' I say, leaning forward, elbow propped on the tabletop and chin propped in my hand. 'What's it like teaching criminology in a place without much crime to speak of?'

I've leaned forward so he's got to lean back. It's a dance we've been dancing.

He runs a big hand over his smooth pate. Shaved and shining in the afternoon light. He was balding once and this was how he handled it way back in the when-it-mattered times. 'Oh, the City has plenty of seedy underbellies, believe me.'

'Really? Can't imagine why anyone would bother with seedy.'

'Well, I suppose there's a kind of romanticism that goes along with it –'

'It's not romantic at all!'

A deep throaty chuckle rumbles out of him. 'You're confusing a notion of hearts and flowers with an intellectual movement called Romanticism.' Noting my embarrassment, he hastens to add, 'And so was I. In order to make a point. Sorry. That's my pretentious side coming out. What I mean is that some people have a longing for the dirt. They want to roll around in suffering like they didn't get enough of it the first time round. Calafia doesn't draw those sorts. Much. But back to your question: I don't teach criminology. I teach the history of it. Lots of City-borns find it fascinating, especially coming from an expert.'

‘Goodness. An expert! Which side of the law saw the benefits of your expertise then?’ I’m teasing of course. Trying to tease.

‘Well that’s a matter of perspective. Bad guys always think they’re justified.’

‘Don’t tell me I’m sitting here flirting with a bad guy then?’

I don’t believe it for one blessed minute of course, that he’s a bad guy. But talking about being bad is supposed to be sexy. I’d been hoping we’d get around to that, to the sexy business, but he’s a gentleman, he’s taking it real slow. And since I’m usually in such a hurry for everything good to happen, I’m trying to be okay it.

I don’t know why the bad always surprises me so much.

Even then there was some kind of coded message in the quirk of his eyebrow, in the set of his mouth – some secret I was supposed to be deciphering. And here’s the thing. I *knew* I reminded him of someone, though he’d been too polite to say so. It’s a feeling you get a lot in the City though, isn’t it? Even with people you couldn’t possibly have known because they’re from, like, medieval Germany or some coastal town in Kaglea Province on Flox. There’s likely a double of me running around out there somewhere living a different life. Or, lord help her, the same one! Did he remind me of anyone? No. He’s… he *was* entirely new to my experience. Matthew LeRoy Scala. Hobbies include: quoting Neruda at the sky, tinkering with robots, deep sea fishing (someday), and dining al fresco. Six feet two inches tall, broad in the shoulders, narrow in the hips, could tend to fat around the middle if he let himself indulge the way he’d like. I wanted to bake that man a pie. I hadn’t wanted to bake a pie in so long –

‘You weren’t an axe-murderer or something, were you?’ I ask him. Teasing of course.

He peers into the mysterious depths of an extra foamy latte. ‘Oh. No. I wasn’t the murderer. I was the guy that – I was the man that caught them. Usually.’

Matthew

We don’t turn up any more bodies right away, but reports start trickling in. Missing persons mostly. Four men. All resurrectees. Some locals, some not. And one Little Big Name. The local KaneNet affiliates picked up that story real quick, but they’re running a scandal angle: Disgruntled scientist disappears. Event organiser suing for breach of contract.

So far the (legitimately, really truly) dead guy has been kept out of the public sphere. Don’t know how, not gonna argue it.

The bartender at the Pink Feather remembers a guy matching the description of our handless vic – one Reverend Harlow aka ‘JimmyJon’ LaPierre, a preacher out of New Dixie in the Great Park. He’d been entertaining the crowds in at the waterfront mall a few weeks back with his prophecies about the return of the one true Satan. According to the bartender, Citizen LaPierre left the Pink Feather in the company of a pretty lady he addressed as Sissy. Great tits, long legs, and nice round ass. ‘A real classic human female,’ the bartender notes fondly. I try to get a more useful description.

Height? Uh… not tall. Skin colour? Pinkish. Eyes? Ooh, well, hard to tell in this lighting. Brown, maybe? Brownish hair too, or maybe blonde. Not red anyway. But with a smile like fireworks. A real bang-bang of a smile.

‘Looks like Citizen LaPierre may have gotten both barrels,’ says DaFwon. I do *not* roll my eyes. I do not because the colourful description of the smile has triggered an itch in my hind brain.

There are smiles that light you up and smiles that hit you like a train. Some smiles do both. I’m a sucker for those kinds. But the rest of the description doesn’t match the make and model I’m after. Hair and eye colour can always be changed though. And the smile, that smile, that’s *her*. I feel it.

A server at Black Penny’s claims the last time she saw Koa Levy (missing skate boarder and recreational drug enthusiast) he’d hooked up with a ‘vintage model.’ Too old for him, the server opined. Jeez! Of course she didn’t catch the woman’s name! Not like the customers all introduce themselves back at her when she says ‘Hi, my name’s Judy and I’ll be your server tonight.’

At Berbatti’s we float a picture around. The aspiring writer Ezra Q.

‘Oh, yes,’ says Citizen Spanbauer, author of several novels and current show-runner of the open- mike poetry nights. ‘Of course we know him.’ Other guy at the table looks familiar, like back-of-the- book-cover familiar. He glances at the picture and groans. The woman next to him nudges his shoulder, and gives him a look of playful admonishment. ‘Be nice,’ she says.

‘When was the last time you saw him?’

‘God, I don’t know.’ Spanbauer glances at the other two. ‘A few weeks ago? We figured he’d caught the muse and holed up somewhere to work.’

‘More like the muse caught him,’ the other man says. The woman snorts.

‘He met someone?’

‘Oh yes indeed. *Isabelle*.’

‘Isabelle have a surname, title, honorific, contact number, barcode, tattoo-ident? Live around here? Anything?’

‘Why do you want to know? What’s this all about anyway?’

‘Citizen Q’s girlfriend reported him missing three weeks ago,’ Glossie tells them. ‘We’re trying to piece together where he was last, who he was with, that kind of thing.’

'Is this like a real investigation? Like… crime-ish?'

'Possibly.' Glossie can barely repress her glee. The people at the table are jumping to all the correct conclusions. But they *entertain* these conclusions. Nobody believes the real death has come a-calling.

'This Isabelle was a regular here?' I ask.

'She started coming to the open-mikes a few months ago,' the woman says. 'Not every week, but often enough. She never read. Sat way in the back. Bit of a shy flower until recently. It's like that for some people. They're here watching and listening forever and then all of the sudden they're ready to shine.'

'She took a shine to Ezra then? Stalking him maybe?'

'Hard to say,' says book-jacket man. 'She was definitely playing to his ego. But whether she really thought he was the next *me* is another matter.'

'I see. Well, thanks for your cooperation.' I ask for a description of Isabelle, and Citizen Spanbauer brightens.

'We vid all the performances.' He offers to point her out of the crowd.

Isabelle

Dicks are dicks. No offence. But really, despite the differences in size, shape, evolutionary specializations, genetic alterations, surgical enhancements, and whatever else you fellas think necessary to impress or impregnate, they all do about the same thing. I can get a decent dick anywhere. But the heart though, that's another matter altogether. Man's heart is the most important ingredient.

'You in the mood to eat?' I ask him. We're strolling the waterfront mall. He has not taken my hand as he has done previously.

'Could be,' he replies. 'What you got in mind?'

I think he thinks I'm angling for him to take me out. He'd been twitchy since we met up and the wariness in his tone is unsettling, but I soldier on. Sometimes a woman's insecurities can have her reading all kinds of things into her man's moods.

See what I done there? Already thinking he was mine.

'Fried chicken, maybe? Pecan pie? I'm in the mood to cook. Can't think of a nicer way to break in my new kitchen than cooking for you.'

His face freezes, the smile fixed to it like time has just up and stopped inside his head.

'Or not.' I can feel my face burning and I press my palms over my cheeks to hide it. 'Oh my goodness! Never mind. Aah, moving too fast again. Sorry.'

He takes a deep breath, lets it out slow. 'You're offering to… cook for me? At – at your house?'

'Well, I was, yeah. The way to a man's heart and all.' I probably tried to bat my lashes. I don't rightly recall.

'You interested in my heart, Bee?' Real careful not to look me in the eye.

'I am,' I reply. 'I – I like you Matthew. I like you a lot. I'd like to get to know you even better. But we can, you know, uh, take it slow. Keep on taking it slow. You could, you could come over and have a glass of wine if you'd rather. Sit on the porch. Watch the dome darken into evening. That's companionable. We don't have to have sex if you don't – I mean, but if you do I'm game – but if you don't –' I just start babbling then. Must've said the word 'sex' about twenty times, couldn't seem to shut my mouth.

'It's just,' I say when I'm running out of breath, 'if it's too soon, all right, but I thought we were moving toward, well, you know, *home cooking*. At the very least.'

There follows a long excruciating moment where all I can hear is the rushing rhythm of my blood pounding in my ears.

‘Well, *Bee*,’ he finally says, ‘I reckon it’s never too soon for fried chicken. Name the hour and I’ll be there with bells on.’ He doesn’t look at me, smoothes back hair he doesn’t have anymore. ‘Don’t suppose you need an extra hand?’

‘Maybe with the washing up after.’ That’s me without a clue. All I’ve heard is that he’s coming over for supper.

I get buttermilk for the biscuits and to soak the chicken in. I get pecans and brown sugar. I’m so happy in my little kitchen cooking a meal for that man.

You know, someone ought to make a liqueur out of that kind of happy so we can add it to our coffee when all the happiness has been sucked out of us.

He doesn’t show up. You probably guessed that. Two cops from the local precinct do though. I’m choking down a drumstick all by my lonesome when they knock on my screen door.

Matthew

It’s her. Not *her* her, not the one that did me in the first time round. But goddamned close enough. Our suspect. Sweet, sexy Bee is Isabelle, is Bella, and I’m pretty confident she’s Sissy with the great tits as well.

This feeling in my chest won’t go away, like my heart’s trying to bust out and run as hard and fast away from *me* as it can possibly get. Like it knows I still might hand it over to her.

I sit across from her. ‘At the behest of the Calafia police, Citizen Gebhart, I’m here to ask you a few questions.’

‘About what?’ Her voice is flat with apathy. She’s twisting a tissue in her hands, and she hasn’t looked at me, not once, since they brought her in.

I slap a picture on the table. ‘Harlow “JimmyJon” LaPierre. Recognize him?’

‘Good Lord, Matthew! Why would you show me something like that? That’s just horrible!’

‘Yes it is. Somebody *killed* him. Cut off his hands. We think it was you.’

The breath leaves her like she's been gut-punched, and she – she looks authentically shocked. But I can't let that sway me. She's obviously a fine little actress to have played so many roles with so many different men.

'Why would you – How could you –?' She sputters disbelief and outrage convincingly enough.

'Killed? Like *dead* killed? How can that even be? It's some kind of media-show trick, isn't it? Isn't it?' She looks at the picture, then up at me with big brown *crying* eyes. Not gonna work, I tell myself. Several times.

'No ma'am,' DaFwon says, enthusiastically. 'It's a picture of a real dead guy.'

One of the cops, Sgt Smith, bristles. I shoot DaFwon a look. He's only supposed to *observe*.

'But when?' she asks. 'How? I mean, really, *how?*'

'About fourteen hours after he left the Pink Feather Lounge with you is when. And the *how* is… under investigation. Cutting off his hands sure didn't help.'

'Oh,' she wails into the shredded tissue, 'he had such *good* hands too!'

This takes me aback. 'So you're admitting to it?'

'How do you get an admission out of that, Matthew?'

'It's Detective Scala, Citizen Gebhart. You need to address me that way from now on.'

Her eyes are like pointy little sticks digging straight through my skull. She's scraping around trying to find something she thinks she saw there once. And maybe she did. I don't know. Or yeah, I do know. Yeah.

She looks away from me, looks at the table top (but not at the picture), and nods, just a little duck of the chin. 'I did not remove the man's hands from his body, *Detective*. I don't even know how that could have been managed. And honestly, what good would his hands be to me without the mind to move them?'

'You admit you were fond of his hands.'

'He was *good* with them. I suspect you're sadly lacking in that department.' Sgt Smith snorts. DaFwon clears his throat.

'There are others, Citizen Gebhart,' I say. 'Other men. Gone missing. And the one thing they all had in common is they were last seen with you.'

'Well, they're not dead,' she declares primly, folding her own hands in her lap.

'Great. Tell us where you saw them last and we'll follow up on their whereabouts. Clear this whole thing up and you'll be free to go.' I've even got my notepad and stylus out, ready to make a list.

'I don't know where they are. But I didn't murder them. Unless you're referring to the "little death." I did sleep with them. We had *sexual relations*. Does that bother you? Is that what this is about?'

'This isn't about you and me, for Christ's sake! This is about the murder of Harlow LaPierre and the possible murders of three others –'

'I didn't kill a soul, Matt.'

'*Detective Scala.*'

'Maybe you ought to set about finding who'd want Harlow LaPierre dead. That would be a good use of your "expertise" now wouldn't it?' She uses air quotes, the bitch.

Glossolalia comes in right then, accompanied by one of the arresting officers. She's got Bee's fancy purse in an evidence bag.

'You're gonna like this, boss,' she says, holding the evidence bag aloft. 'We couldn't get the thing open to examine the contents. The PC here suggested there might be some quantum lock thing going on.' The constable ducked his head and shuffled his feet in *aw shucks* pleasure at her praise. 'We ran it over to the physics department at the college and had Dr Krauss take a look. He's pretty sure it's smuggled tech from outside the City. He's pretty sure you could hide lots of bodies in it.'

Bee's eyes, which had gone all huge at the sight of her purse, are now in danger of rolling to the other

side of her head. 'Really?' she says. 'Do I look like I know a damn thing about physics?'

DaFwon snorts. 'No, ma'am.'

'I bought it at an antiques shop.'

Sgt Smith looks at me. 'Could be an Old Gods artefact. There was that big heist a few years ago, remember?'

I nod, recalling the incident.

'Oh my god,' Bee exclaims, 'this is the stupidest thing I've ever had to put up with in all existence and I'm including the extra house my first husband bought just for his Lego collection!' Bee stabs a finger in the direction of the evidence bag. 'I bought that at Resurrection Antiques on Motet Hill. You can ask the shopkeeper if you like. I have a *receipt*.'

'Ma'am,' Sgt Smith says, 'thing is, a scientist went missing from the Convention Centre right before he was to give a lecture. We have witnesses that put you and him together in room 213 of the Menlo Park Hotel eight days ago –'

'Niko. Yes. I helped him… disappear. I admit that. But, he's happy. He's in a better place now.'

Well that's that then, we're thinking, (or, at least those of us that remember what 'better place' is a euphemism for), *so are the rest of the poor suckers*.

Turned out it was true. All gone to better places. Better places *in the City*. All doing quite well elsewhere, thank you very much. Except for LaPierre, of course. But that had nothing to do with Isabelle Gebhart. And after that day she'd have nothing to do with me.

Isabelle

Oh, the mission is still going. I believe I said so when I walked through the door. A sleazy one-night stand I believe I said. I don't mind starting over. I've done it often enough.

Honey, I'm bone dry here. Set me up another, will you?

It's real sad what happened to Reverend LaPierre, and everyone says it's just a fluke, a one-off, that it can't happen again. But I'm not ashamed to say I do sympathize a bit with his killer. That poor pickup truck loved him so much and he never did appreciate her. She completely remade herself to the exact model and specifications of a thing he so loved, down to the bumper sticker and the Jesus fish, and what did he do? Had other women right there on her front seat! No wonder she went a little crazy.

No one knows how she managed to kill him yet. Or if they do they're not talking to me.

But the others aren't dead, for heaven's sake. That's not how the bag works. It's called an *Isis Womb*. A woman's womb is the cradle of life. I'm pretty sure it's the same for a goddess.

Niko's building a theme park in Mappamundi called Wardenclyffe. He's got funding and backers and everything. He sent me vids of what they're planning and it's really spectacular, I mean just breathtaking. And he's finally getting all those inventions out of his head and into material reality. I'm glad for him. I really am.

I also understand the 'next Nabokov' is teaching Australopithecines self-actualization through journaling and poetry. He says it's real hard work but the most rewarding he's ever done. He's working on a book about his spiritual awakening titled *The Isis Method for Building a Better You: a Journey through the Gates of Self-Knowledge*. I thought he should call it 'In the Bag and Out Again,' but he didn't find it nearly as funny as I did.

My little Gemini is on a skater pilgrimage. He intends to skate down the best, most treacherous hills in eight Districts. That's an ambitious goal even for eternity. Still, I'm thinking somebody ought to warn him about being more careful with his precious body. As likely as it is that the terrible thing that happened to the

Reverend was just a fluke, we can never be certain of anything. Nothing is forever.

But there are three better men out there now, and that's a little because of my handbag. And maybe a little because of me. I'm starting over though. New plan. New man. Eventually all the pieces I need will come together in one good –

Yeah.

I see him.

Matthew

I walk into a bar with my heart in my hands. Like a chump. Again. But hey, figure she can't rip it out of me if I'm handing it to her on a platter. Here you go, honey. It's all yours.

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Tearing his eye unwillingly away from Isabelle Gebhart, Akroates sees that the familiar figure of Matthew Scala has indeed entered the tavern, and is shifting nervously as the audience's attention – not to mention Isabelle's – is turned towards him. Akroates has no trouble seeing what the blonde woman once found so attractive in the detective. Though he can appreciate the current storyteller 's distinctions in the abstract, the cyclops is stirred far more by the muscular, bald charms of her predecessor.

As if drawn from her against her will, Isabelle's solar smile is re-emerging as she steps away from the fire-pit and across to Matt. There's a palpable awkwardness between them, a nerviness to Scala's demeanour, which her hand on his arm does little to dispel.

The audience is just as tense and silent – until she kisses him, and the room erupts with applause. As they leave, Arianrhod, on-the-ball enough to end the evening on a high, thanks one and all for coming, switches off the fire-pit hologram, and enjoins them to continue taking advantage of Akroates' outstanding selection of intoxicants until closing time.

The general sense, as Akroates discovers from chatting to them as they do so, is that Matt's and Isabelle's stories were, after all, dramatic fictions: a cunningly staged pair of complementary pieces of performance art. The relief, emanating especially from those who heard the earlier version too, is almost physical.

Akroates cannot agree, and nor, as far as he can tell, does Arianrhod. 'There are three sisters who share a name: the Story Happening, the Story Told and the Story Heard,' is her gnomic verdict. Still, if people's capacity to deceive themselves means that they keep coming to events at Akroates' inn, he scarcely feels minded to complain.

Left behind by Isabelle's spectacular exit, Lena Dmitri is now talking animatedly to Hal Benson, the chemistry between them clear. Her drone is hovering nearby, unhappily protective. Akroates is surprised when he sees the Richard III Remake sidle up to join them, but he is distracted by Greaves and Jenny leaving.

'See you soon, barkeep,' Lewis barks cordially. 'At the next one of these, if not before. I'll say this for them – parochial they may be, but your customers certainly know how to spin a yarn.'

Akroates is a listener par excellence, but he is, like all the Citizens, fundamentally human, and humans are storytelling animals. Later as he locks up, and sweeps and tidies the empty pub, cleaning and polishing the last abandoned glasses, upending chairs on tables, counting up the cash, the cyclops tries to imagine what City life holds next for those whom he has come to know this evening through their stories.

Helena Dmitri, for instance – will Harry Benson be part of her life now, or have they already exchanged drone numbers and gone their separate ways? Could Harry's doppelfinder business ever be sufficient to keep Lena in the comfort she takes for granted? Will she find her Mrs Gladstone, and were the housekeeper 's motives for retiring as mundane as she would have had Lena believe?

Are Isabelle Gebhart and Matt Scala fated to be together, or apart? Will Isabelle take the heart her lover offers, and if so what kind of Matt Scala will the Isis Womb leave behind? Will Isabelle succeed in birthing from the bag her perfect man – and if so, will he thank her, or abandon her like so many others before him?

That other artificial man, the Remake Richard – what has his life been like since Cllr Plantagenet granted him his dark epiphany? What is he even doing in Calafia, a billion Districts from Chandlerville? Is he still working as a detective, desperately trying to salve his coward conscience in the face of damnation?

Was there ever a man more in need of the redemptive rebirth the Isis Womb supposedly offers – apart, perhaps, from the sad, embittered husk who left after the stranger Claude Lapin?

Of all the evening's narrators, only Greaves and the skald offer Akroates little scope for speculation – he sees them and their partners regularly, so if any major changes do overtake their lives, he is likely to be informed.

As he climbs the stairs late that night, past the empty rooms long since vacated by his deme-kin, and takes himself to bed in the room where he himself was resurrected two-hundred-and-ninety-one years since, the weary cyclops finds a new story forming in his mind: one where Mrs Gladstone runs a revolutionary cell out of Calafia, organising punitive property damage against just such plutocrats and wastrels as her late employers and Hal Benson's chums; where Richard, commissioned by one of her victims to bring the villainess to justice, instead leads Lena and Hal to her; where the three of them – Richard having divested himself of his own villainy through a strategic surrender to Isabelle and the promise of her divine handbag – join up with Mrs Gladstone and become her black-ops cadre, infiltrating City society at the highest level; and where they are, eventually, joined by Isabelle and Matt's offspring, the perfect man, born of Isis, the lord of light who will transform the City beyond imagining; the whole process being documented by Lewis Greaves while Lapin makes disorientingly random comments; and where…

…Akroates sleeps.

(It has to be said that Akroates is an incorrigible romantic, and not by any means in possession of all the facts. In particular, the changes which are even now sweeping the City, of which the wounding of Lena's acquaintance Zeb and the bizarre vehicular homicide of Rev LaPierre are mere outlying precursors, and which will soon draw the Citizenry inexorably into a state of Civil War, are as yet a closed book to him.

Still, who can say that his speculations are wrong? As Arianrhod observed, fact and myth are unrelated qualities, and the aspects which make a story 'true' are far from easily defined.

Of only one thing we can be sure: nobody who was here tonight will live happily ever after. They are, after all, human.)

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

Born in 1964, **Simon Bucher-Jones** worked for the Old United Kingdom Civil Service in the years 1988-2030, before his retirement at age 66. He also augmented his eWorth on the then primitive YouExchange by writing, and originating the Oceanic Ocelot Meme. A conscientious objector to the Proactive DeAging of 2037, which applied a post-SNPD Solution to the 'pensions time-bomb', he remained a Natural Ager until his death in prison at 78. A woolly-thinker, then a Christian, then an atheist, then a surprised atheist, since Resurrection Day Simon has been a writer-librarian and is presently dedicated to reading every book ever written. His most notable work (with Jonathan Dennis) remains the unfinished and cursed *The Brakespeare Voyage*, which he is promising to complete soon. At the last count it has now had the highest number of prospective publishers of any long-awaited twenty-first-century novel.

Jay Eales, ya say? I knew the fella, once upon'a. On the road to St Ives or somesuch. Northampton? Sounds about right. Land a' the Blessed Alan. Back in them days, people had holes in they shoes, they gots Elves ta do the fixin'. Well, somebody gots ta pay 'em, right? Fer his sins, that's what he done. Paid off them Elves ta keep 'em tap-tap-tapping soles 'n' heels all night long. Elves being Elves, it din't last, so he sold elbow grease 'n' long weights ta simple folks, and a spell lockin' up wrong-uns. But all through, he's scritch-scratchin' away at his stories. Some got bought and some didn't. Did he ever make it here to the City? There's the thing. I ain't rightly sure he atcherly died… Plain forgot to pick up the knack of it from ol' Sister Death, he tole me. Laid hisself down, but it just never took. He be out there somewhere, pissin' an' moanin' 'bout editors, I 'spect.

Kelly Hale's contribution to twenty-first-century Earth's human social welfare was a practical fairy-godmothering network serving children in foster care. She lived in quiet, vaguely contented poverty during which she raised children and authored several works of fiction for small-press publishers. Her first novel, *Erasing Sherlock* – a fantasy about a time-travelling maid-of-all-work whose case study of the real Sherlock Holmes goes terribly awry, resulting in all sorts of madcap adventures, exciting chases, kidnappings, various acts of reckless passion and an actual volcanic eruption – was awarded a prize for literary awesomeness. Imagine her surprise and delight when, some several years after Resurrection Day, her very own version of Sherlock Holmes walks into her little espresso bar in New London having found her through CreatorMatchCreation. They've been creating together ever since. Their critically acclaimed series *The One and Only* pits Sherlock against Sherlock in a race to beat the clock as these great detectives and chosen contestants chase after clues and each other to solve mysteries spanning every District and to the farthest reaches of the City of the Saved.

Ian Potter is a loathsome human being whose Wikipedia entry contains Qliphothic snares for the unwary. You have vowed to destroy him should the chance arise. I will be believed to have had no part in it. When he was alive he was mainly older than he seems now and wrote jokes, plays, short stories and factual things no one much cared about. He's most famous for that really bad thing that kicked off after he died that he'd no idea he set in motion. It was definitely his fault though. He hides in darkness underwater now. When you find him, understanding these words means you'll know what to do.

Philip Purser-Hallard's writing career was noted for his contributions of prose fiction to the *Faction Paradox*, *Iris Wildthyme*, *Bernice Summerfield* and *Doctor Who* universes. He was an enthusiastic early contributor to the Obverse MegaText Conglomerate at a time when the corporation was still an obscure small-press publisher. At the time of his death during the Slight Nanoconstructor Programming Difficulty of 2025, Purser-Hallard was employed as a civil servant. Since Resurrection Day, he has resided with a community of posthuman hermaphrodite godlings while avoiding continual questions about the fact that his

2004 novel *Of the City of the Saved*, and its various sequels and tie- in anthologies, predicted the City perfectly in every detail. His occasional public expressions of frustration tend to focus on the contention that, with nonillions of authors in cosmic history speculating about the ultimate fate of the human species, the chances were *somebody* was going to get it right.

With a doctorate in psychology, **Susannah Tiller**'s writing, both fiction and non-fiction, reflected her interests of people interacting with technologies, human relationships, and ethical issues. She was a noted fan-fiction writer in the *Doctor Who* universe, and contributed to numerous anthologies.

'Eternity Is Just for Starters' was her first professional fiction work, unless you count her second place in a *Choose Your Own Adventure* synopsis competition when she was twelve. Susannah's plans for world domination led to her untimely death, in an accident involving industrial quantities of chocolate. Since Resurrection Day, Susannah has lived in the City's arts and crafts district. Learning from the world's best chefs, embroiderers, and psychologists, she creates edible delicacies that double as wall hangings and personality tests. Her plans for world domination continue. She dedicates her story to Tom, her partner in life, and in dining. Together, they created and shared many memorable meals.

Richard Wright's pre-Resurrection life was spent fielding questions about why he wasn't the African-American author of novels such as *Black Boy* and *Native Son*, the keyboardist in Pink Floyd, or the goalkeeper who played for Manchester City. When not denying that he was any of these people he managed to scribble some short stories and novels of his own. Residing for much of his life in the United Kingdom, Richard met an early end shortly after moving to India, where he discovered that snakes found him even less charming than humans did. Since Resurrection Day he has shared a house with Richard Wright, Richard Wright, and Richard Wright. He has waited centuries for one of the other Richard Wrights to be asked by a stranger whether they are that one who wrote those Iris Wildthyme short stories for the Obverse MegaText Conglomerate. To date, only Ms Wildthyme herself has done so, and as she seemed rather annoyed about the whole thing he kept his head down and pretended to be Dave Gilmour.